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# LORD CASTLETON'S WARD.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. B. R. GREEN.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

VOL. III.



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# LORD CASTLETON'S WARD.

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## CHAPTER I.

Across the waves, away and far, my spirit turns to thee.

THE exile of Lord Castleton—for such in the love-god's calendar had it been chronicled by two of his votaries—had been simply unendurable but for the transmission of thought by letter. Those from his ward served his lordship, not alone as bulletins of her physical, but of her mental and moral, health combined. They satisfied the ardent solicitude of the lover on the one hand, the utmost stretch of his fastidious temperament on the other, for the constitution of the man was essentially fastidious in everything that affected the delicacy of woman, above all of her who was, at no distant day, to lend grace and dignity to his name and race.

These letters—the outpourings of the heart rather than the coinage of the brain—always tender in their tone, nevertheless varied with the humour of the writer, and were now sad, now gay, as the particular feeling of the moment pre-



dominated—they might have elicited a smile from the pedant, but the sternest of philosophers had been touched by the mere human goodness breathing from every line.

Yes, clear as daylight to her lover's perception was each emotion of that guileless heart; even the while earnest to spare him an hour's solicitude on her behalf, she piqued herself upon her tact in refraining from the faintest hint of anything of a painful character, she stood self-betrayed by the very crudeness of her efforts at disguise. Thus it was that the strain of forced gaiety that prevailed throughout the letter that suppressed all mention of the death of her aged friend sufficing to alarm the anxious heart of her guardian, drew from her, in reply to his inquiries, a full revelation of the loss she had sustained; but she dwelt with such generous eulogy of Mrs. Stewart, that his apprehensions on her account were in a measure quieted; and a subsequent communication from Lady Graham, enlarging, with her customary tact, upon the grave respectability of that lady's character, tended still further to reassure him.

Energetic, and even punctilious, as was Lord Castleton in the discharge of his diplomatic duties, he was yet by no means inclined to yield up his scant leisure to the numerous invitations pressed upon him by the magnates of that far-

off land of pomp and pride, where merit is so often sepulchred alive.

Without affecting exclusiveness, he contrived to hold a portion of his evenings at his own disposal, and never were moments so precious as those spent in the seclusion of his own apartment, where, resigning himself to the rapture of thought, the electric chain that bound soul to soul was unloosed, and the sweet vision of his absent love was restored to him; the music of her low, sweet voice, like the strains of an Æolian harp, stole into his heart, subduing it to softest tenderness. Hour after hour of the solemn night, the unstarred vault of heaven hanging like a sable cloud above the sleeping city, would he, instead of wooing the rest he so needed—for a grave responsibility was his—remain rapt in the ecstasy of that bright dream. No doubts of her who held him in this sweet thrall shadowed his spirit—none of her to whom that vestal purity was confided.

It were doing little justice to the subtle delicacy and tenderness of a love like his to say that he was without the thousand natural solitudes that *will* gather round the trembling heart of the most assured love, but no foreboding dimmed his sense of security in her innocence.

Ah! why did not some angel, wandering from her sphere, stop on her mission of mercy, and

warn him of the peril menacing the loved one ? But it's a cold, inhospitable clime, that Russian clime ; and perhaps when sprites, and elves, and angels *do* condescend to quit their native element, they prefer, like the deities of old, the lower latitude of a more genial and classic soil. Anyway, no wail of woe, no portent dire, startled his excellency from his "fool's paradise;" blindly he pursued his course over the slippery ground of political warfare, little less honoured abroad than he had been at home ; his pedigree of high principle and high talents winning for him a more enduring renown than the loftiness of his rank and position combined.

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## CHAPTER II.

'Tis said the lion will turn and flee,  
From a maid in the pride of her purity.  
SIEGE OF CORINTH.

THE evening of the day on which Mrs. Stewart's interview with Lady Graham took place, her ladyship herself chaperoned the fair heiress to the opera, leaving her kinswoman, now bound to her by chains of adamant, to the plenitude of bliss in her brief re-union with her son.

On her ladyship's entrance a score of lorgnettes were raised in the direction of their box. Amid

that vast and brilliant assemblage of the fairest and noblest of the land, Florence de Malcé shone the brightest—and yet, though she could neither be unconscious of her own surpassing loveliness or of the homage it inspired, no glance of triumph, not the faintest assumption of consequence, betrayed such consciousness.

Several gentlemen, claiming but very distant acquaintance with Lady Graham, made their way to her box, hoping to win a smile from her fair companion.

To one of these visitors a more gracious welcome was extended by her ladyship than to the rest, yet his too notorious reputation should have banished him her presence, for it was no other than Sir Harcourt Neville to whom, with seeming insouciance, she threw out every lure to remain, covertly so, nevertheless, for she cared not that others should penetrate her schemes. And Sir Harcourt was acute enough to perceive this, to perceive that her ladyship was playing a part; her motive he could not fathom, but he was too much a man of the world to fail to make his advantage of it.

As the curtain fell with the close of the opera her ladyship, who never stayed the ballet, rose. It had been a brilliant night, and the crowd was immense. She had accepted the offered escort of Sir Harcourt to the carriage, but in the crush-

room she more than once hung back, bidding Florence go on, and at length adroitly contrived to separate herself from her and the baronet, altogether.

Gaily chatting and laughing with Hope Beringford, whose party leaving, too, was close in front, Florence did not miss her ladyship till they emerged into broader space. The Beringfords moved on, and she then found herself alone with Sir Harcourt, for nowhere was her ladyship to be seen. Several minutes elapsed—still no Lady Graham.

Without a doubt it had been *en règle* to faint, or at least betray the outward and visible signs patent on like occasions, but Florence was unversed in such lore ; moreover she was in the habit of violating established precedents with a careless grace, peculiarly her own—none the less was she without uneasiness, but it was on her ladyship's account rather than her own.

“ Might she not have returned for something left behind ?—would Sir Harcourt be so very kind as to seek her in the theatre ? ”

The baronet pleaded the impossibility of leaving so young a lady without protection, a conspicuous mark for observation. He saw what she did not see, that free glances were levelled at her, while more than one wandering night-bird smiled significantly, yet passed on.

What was to be done? Nearly all who did not stay the ballet had by this time left the theatre; the situation of the young lady now began to be most embarrassing—to one less new to the world than Florence it had been yet more so.

Sir Harcourt proposed to place her in the carriage, and then seek her ladyship—

“But what can have happened, Sir Harcourt?”

“Nothing in the shape of harm, be sure. Her ladyship, unobserved by us, must have passed, and is probably waiting you in the carriage.”

This appeared so feasible, that without further hesitation Florence accepted his offered arm, and Lady Graham's carriage was vociferously called for; but as Hotspur says of spirits of the deep, “you may call, but will they come when you do call?” No charioteer replied to the summons.

At the end of five minutes it was clear that the carriage, like the chaperon, was not within calling distance; and Florence, totally regardless of herself, once more entreated Sir Harcourt to return to the theatre in quest of her ladyship, but this he courteously but peremptorily declined to do.

It was evident to the practised man of the world that there was design in all this on the part of her most decorous and diplomatic ladyship. The whole was a preconcerted plan,

though for the moment it baffled his penetration to divine its object.

Keeping his eye on the now agitated girl, he advanced a few steps in front of the colonnade, and again the call for my "Lady Graham's carriage" was loudly shouted.

"Her la'ship's carriage hav druv away more nor ten minnits, yer 'onner," said a wretched looking object, with a dot and go one step, respectfully doffing his greasy cap.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yer 'onner—'twas me as shouted for it."

"Who got in it, my man?"

"A lady, yer 'onner."

"Only one?"

"Only one as I see—it druv away like blazes, yer 'onner."

A gratuity proportioned in some degree to the internal satisfaction of the querist on receiving this information, probably sent the poor fellow home to the rare luxury of a hearty supper.

"Pray, pray, be under no apprehension, but, missing us, her ladyship has, it is supposed, returned home. She imagined you, no doubt, safe with other friends; but why this alarm?" for Florence paled and reddened by turns. "My brougham waits your commands, Mdle. de Malcé; honour me so far, I beseech you, as to accept so poor a service at my hands."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks, Sir Harcourt, but indeed it is impossible;" and as if still finding it difficult to believe her ladyship really gone, the poor girl looked anxiously round on all sides, as if half expecting to see her emerge from some hidden recess of the building.

"Forgive my urgency—but for your own sake, Mdlle. de Malcé, I would presume to counsel your immediate use of my brougham to convey you home. The impertinence of the by-standers begins to grow intolerable."

She started, and made a step forward.

"Nay, nay! you cannot stir—the rain is descending in torrents."

This was not strictly true—still it did rain, and in her girl's simplicity Florence fancied the baronet urged his request mainly on that account.

"If, Sir Harcourt, I might ask you to allow your servant to procure me a conveyance—a fly,—anything."

"Impossible! I cannot permit you to return at such an hour in a hack-cab, for a fly is not to be had."

In spite of her perplexity Florence laughed a merry little laugh. "I should hail with rapture any convoy, Sir Harcourt, were it but a covered cart. Oh for the days of sedans!"

"Thank heaven for their extirpation!" mur-



mured the baronet, once more stepping out, as she imagined, to reconnoitre.

His absence scarcely embraced the lapse of a minute, for he had not the most remote intention of hailing any conveyance, whether patrician or plebeian, beyond his own, yet that brief moment sufficed to show Florence that from this exposed place she must at once remove.

"Divinest Ariadne!" exclaimed a perfumed jack-o'-dandy, advancing in front of her, "forget the ingrate who has basely deserted you, and deign to regard with compassion the humblest of your slaves."

But Sir Harcourt was again at her side.

Darting a glance of haughty disdain on the so-called gentleman, he led the agitated girl without a word to the outer portico, in front of which a close carriage was drawn up. The steps were let down, and in another moment she was within-side it, with the most notorious roué of the day for her sole companion.

What directions the coachman received Florence never knew; she only felt that she was saved from threatened insult by Sir Harcourt, and that she was seated beside him in his own carriage at midnight.

With her beautiful head bent low over her small clasped hands, she sat silent and abashed, painfully conscious of the delicacy of her position,

yet without a thought that wronged him who sat there.

And where was *his* triumph, where the exulting spirit that not a moment before Sir Harcourt had so hardly controlled at the idea of being the sole escort of this beautiful but most friendless girl? for not the veriest outcast in the streets of London could be more friendless.

The baronet was indisputably a man of pleasure, but he had not quite erased from his escutcheon the title of gentleman, and as he now looked upon this helpless girl in the freshness of her perfect innocence and perfect trust, all evil thoughts died out in his breast. He knew himself to be a thing apart from her, sundered wide as the poles by the dominion of that very innocence.

Alone, defenceless, and in his power, she was yet, in the supremacy of her purity and childlike faith, a more sacred object in his sight than when circled by the strong arm of legitimate protection. Her guileless trust more moved him than even her angelic loveliness.

He spoke, he knew not what, but some encouraging protecting words. All his hardihood had fled, shamed out of him by her very presence; yet was it rapture to bask in the light of that presence, whose subtle essence exhaled so holy an atmosphere.

"Oh, Sir Harcourt!" said the trembling girl, "surely some accident has happened to my friend, she would never otherwise have left me to a stranger's protection."

"A *stranger's* protection may not prove less effectual than the so-called friend's. Fear not, sweet lady, none could injure you!"

Touched by these generous words, she yet fancied that they were spoken in a tone of gentle reproach. She looked up at him—

"With eyes so pure, that from their ray  
Dark vice had turn'd abash'd away."

"Forgive me, Sir Harcourt, I did not mean to pain you—you, so good and kind, I would not hurt you for the world—but my spirits are hurried—the trouble I am giving you—the late hour—the—the—;" and confused, overcome, she suddenly paused, leaning her head against the side of the carriage to conceal the tears that now fell thick and fast through her slender fingers.

"By Diana's chastity! but this is too much," burst forth the baronet, as he made a dash at the check-string.

"Mdlle. de Malcé! for your own sake it were better I were elsewhere."

In an instant the door of the carriage was flung open, and in the next Sir Harcourt was standing in the open air, his hat reverentially held above his head.

"My coachman is at your orders. Brook Street, I presume?"

The door was slammed to, the carriage drove on, but the baronet followed it in a hansom, and saw its trembling inmate alight in safety at her ladyship's door.

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### CHAPTER III.

And there are lines, not always faded,  
Which speak a mind not all degraded,  
Even by the crimes through which it waded.

BYRON.

\* \* \* \* \*

Halt, and be still, ye hot-cheeked bacchanals!

OLLIER.

DISMISSING the cab, the baronet, in spite of the drizzling rain, proceeded leisurely through Grosvenor Square. Some element of his higher nature had been stirred, and (rare event with him) being in no mood for companionship, he determined to go home then and there.

"After all," he mused, as he turned in that direction, "it has never, I believe, been finally established whether virtue is a downright tangible thing, or only a shade. Ages back it was apostrophized as the last by that tartuffe par excellence, Marcus Brutus, and I don't know that we have ascended many steps higher up wisdom's ladder since his time; and yet, from

sundry mystic throbs and thumps within, I have of late entertained certain vague misgivings on the subject. There *may* be such a thing as virtue, though I have missed its track. Yes, it may exist in some remote and no doubt obnoxious corner of this vicious-peopled globe. Anyway innocence is no sham, and with what a subtle power is it gifted! How strangely bewitching is this young girl in her unconscious and ineffable purity! What a delicate creation! why the man who wins her cannot choose but turn saint!" The sinner paused, then laughed a hollow, cheerless laugh. "Am I taking leave of my senses? I to fall into rhapsody about innocence and virtue, when my whole life has been employed in kicking down every trace of them. Win *her*! preposterous! as well seek to bring down yonder star riding high in the blue ether, as dream such dream! Miranda poisoned by the breath of Caliban! If indeed I could knock out the last ten years of my worthless life—," but here his mental aberrations came to a dead halt, and he was in some peril of being knocked out, or down, altogether.

"What, ho there!" shouted the foremost of a party of three gentlemen (for in that light no doubt they were popularly held), slapping the baronet smartly on the shoulder. "Neville, by all that's wonderful! Paris without his Helen! Why where have you bestowed your divinity?"

We saw her housed within your triumphal car not twenty minutes since. By the immortal Gods, Neville, but you have the luck of old Nick and your own to boot. The daintiest piece of animated clay within the land. Beats La Madélon into fits!"

Sir Harcourt shuddered at this association. La Madélon! the Aspasia of May Fair!

"Do you," he asked, "speak of—but no, I'll not syllable that name within hearing of such crack-brained roysterers. It is one which must not be on such lips as ours, Balfour."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Right Honourable Ellis Balfour, in chorus with our old acquaintance Captain Stanton, of the Guards. "Neville turned milk-sop, by all that's spoony! Why, man, we shall forswear you for our commander-in-chief. I commend your taste though, the De Malcé is adorable; but how long will she hold out? for she's driving down perdition's hill as though ten thousand devils were at her heels."

"Ye—es," drawled the life-guardsmen, "she keeps the steam at high pressure."

"No doubt," subjoined Balfour, "it is with the charitable intention of arresting this headlong career that Neville has caged the divinity in his harem. But you mean to invite us to the inauguration supper, n'est ce pas?"

"Not to-night," returned the baronet, a smile

of exquisite irony curling his lips ; "you have imbibed just a soupçon too much champagne for the company of angels."

Another vociferous laugh broke on the night's silence.

"Hang it, but Neville's in the right to keep his sultana to himself," hiccupped the gallant captain. "No poachers on my manor, say I, and the De Malcé's a bird for a royal cage, and no mistake."

"Hark ye, bold senhors ! a word in your ear," said the baronet, with a strangely grave air for him ; "I am not, as ye have good cause to know, the saintliest monk within her sacred majesty's domains, but I will hold the first among you that breathes that name in my hearing my foe. If you can find a chaster title for chastity, apply it to this lady ; but even then, let not mocking lips such as ours presume to speak of her."

This time no one laughed, and at a turn of the street they stood before the portico of the A—— Club.

"You halt here, I believe, so Addio, for I mean to sleep before dawn, and for once in my own crib."

"I thought, Neville," growled the affronted guardsman, "you were to give me my revenge to-night."

"And I wager he will," said the good-natured

vaurien Balfour. "Fifty guineas on it—do you take the bet?"

"Not I," returned Stanton sulkily, "I bet on the turn of no man's humour."

"Not even on your own, eh, Stanton?" said the baronet. "Oh, wise young judge, how I do honour ye; I too have forsworn the dangerous practice of betting, I lay no more wagers."

"Bet you a cool hundred you do, Neville," cried Balfour.

"Done!" said the baronet.

"Done!" echoed Balfour.

And the echoes of their mad laughter rung through the gilded dome of the entrance-hall as, in spite of his late assertion to the contrary, Sir Harcourt followed his companions to a sumptuous chamber, a very lure to vice, where, seated at the gaming-table, long after myriads and myriads of the sons of toil had gone forth to their daily labours, the trio might have been seen. "O tempora! O mores!"

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## CHAPTER IV.

The purest treasure mortal times afford,  
Is spotless reputation; that away,  
Men are but gilded loam or painted clay.

SHAKESPEARE.

ON reaching Brook Street, Florence was involved in yet further perplexity and even alarm



on Lady Graham's account, for she had not returned home.

Mistress Wallis, her ladyship's own maid, looking like a yard and a half of dried parchment, had wrapped herself in a triple panoply of starched propriety, on being summoned to a visitor at "sic an hour o' the night."

Vain was the effort on the culprit's part to make this woman comprehend that she had by some strange mischance lost sight of her mistress in the crowd, and was thus forced upon the courtesy of a comparative stranger.

"It was an unco quare thing for a leddy to do ; a God-fearing, decent body would no be abroad at sic ungodly hours," she stoutly maintained.

"Oh, Wallis, I know, I know I am the most thoughtless, the most imprudent creature in the world, but only let me see Lady Graham in safety, and I will never, never leave her arm at any public place again ; no, not for an instant."

The generous girl would cast no blame upon her ladyship, though she well knew that it had been by her own desire, twice reiterated, that she had, on leaving their box, taken the arm of Sir Harcourt.

"But, Wallis, you will let me see Miss Graham ?"

Stiffly the woman drew up her tall gaunt

figure. "Deed and I'm no 'reft o' my senses, Miss Malcy; wud ye rouse the puir lassie out o' her slumber, and twelve o' the clock stricken? I'm thinking ye'd be wise, Miss Malcy, to gang awa' hame, her ladyship may be waiting ye at your ain place."

"But I cannot venture out alone—pray, pray, counsel me what to do, good Wallis."

"Deed, Miss Malcy, and I'll no commet mysel', ye'll e'en gang your ain gait."

Florence, growing more and more alarmed on her ladyship's account, at last begged that a conveyance might be sent for. Surlily enough the Cerberus of the establishment consented to this.

The rain had ceased, but the night was dark and gusty. In the hall Florence paused, perhaps to see if any one were prepared to accompany her, but perceiving no one she looked pleadingly into the bronzed face of the woman, not a muscle of whose cast-iron features stirred, who seemed indeed to grudge her the poor courtesy of attending her downstairs.

"You will not let me go alone, Wallis?"

No answer. The pitiless face never relaxed.

"It is so late,—must I—must I go alone?"

"Not while Peter Briggs has the use of his limbs, though I get the sack for it," cried a voice at the street door, and in another minute the

speaker had assisted the last descendant of the De Malcés into that dim receptacle, yeleft a cab, and was himself perched on the box beside the grim phaeton, who alternately tugged at and flogged the wretched jaded animal attached to it.

The man had but obeyed the impulse of his honest manly nature in offering his protection to a lady in distress, nor cared at that moment, as he had in his slang dialect declared, if the loss of his place paid the forfeit of his humanity; and perhaps, as the splashed and dripping hack drove from the inhospitable door, the woman who had begrudged a kindly word for charity's sake, might have felt a shade of remorse as she turned her back upon the sweet mournful face that had yet so little of an upbraiding expression in it, for she muttered, "I dinna care harm should happen her, puir mitherless bairn."

Mistress Wallis was under no sort of apprehension of her ladyship's displeasure for the slight put upon the "mitherless bairn." Servants quite naturally take their cue from the heads of the household, and there was not one among her ladyship's that, despite her Scottish caution, had not penetrated the secret of her dislike of the ward of Lord Castleton.

On reaching Eaton Place, Florence learned that Lady Graham having unaccountably missed

her at the opera, had driven home, in the expectation of finding her already arrived there under the care of friends with whom she had fallen in ; that after long and anxiously awaiting her return, she had at last left, in the hope of meeting with her in Brook Street.

And what, it may be asked, did her ladyship propose to herself by her strange freak ? Why, this ;—she hoped out of the raw material she had brought to bear upon it, to raise a rumour to the prejudice of the imprudent girl, even if she failed in cementing an intimacy between her and the notoriously profligate baronet.

Now a tale bunglingly put together may fall hurtless to the ground, while even a pebble skilfully aimed becomes a deadly weapon, as was notably proved on Goliath, or his descendants might to this day be peopling the earth with a race of Titans ; so her ladyship wisely decided to set the engine in motion herself ; she confided the occurrence of the evening to a *select* few, relating how the young lady had in the most crafty way contrived to separate herself from her, intent alone, she grieved to say, on securing the escort of Sir Harcourt Neville. How she had vainly sought her in every direction, till, coming to the conclusion that she must have left under the care of other friends, being indeed assured by one lady that she had seen Mdle. de Malcé

led to a carriage by a gentleman, she returned to Eaton Place, again to be disappointed of meeting with her. "At last!—at last!" continued the fair and veracious narrator, "at an hour I dare not name, the unhappy girl did return."

"What! with that dreadful Sir Harcourt?—alone with that awful man in the dead of the night?"

"He did not exactly return *with* her to Eaton Place, though when, or where, he left her, I failed precisely to discover."

It might have been argued that the return of the lady without the knight involved no absolute crime.

"A hat can do no harm without a head," was sagaciously urged in her defence before her incensed Othello, by the fair Distafina—but, alas! Florence de Malcé was not to be heard in her defence. It was the dagger of Iago under cover of night, the "kill honest men i' the dark" system, that her ladyship patronized, and it did its work bravely—and the assassin was unseen and unsuspected.

Thus the rumour, faint and shadowy at first, but gaining strength and solidity as it was retailed from one rosy mouth to another, assumed in a short space of time a giant shape. Unhappily it was not all false that her ladyship

insinuated, garbled, nay, mendacious as was her narrative, there was still the silken thread of candour meandering through this web of wiles, that left Florence at the mercy of her detractors —“ A lie that is only half a lie is ever the worst of lies.” Too true it was, she *had* been seen by more than one to enter the baronet's carriage, seen to lean (and not reluctantly was sneeringly insinuated) on his arm. Together they were seen to drive away, and—to whither borne? A momentous question this. Conjecture spread wide her pinions, but lost herself amid the four shifting points of the compass. Matrons with daughters to marry were not ill-pleased that a fair name should be sullied, and if daughters did not actually repeat the slander, their silence helped to confirm it.

And lightly enough when Lady Graham met the ill-used girl, did she slur over her own conduct in the affair; and her tactics, never at fault, brought her triumphantly off, for the bewildered Florence, listening to her ladyship's version, found herself the delinquent, and in the end the apologist, while even the gentle Ellen besought her, with tears, to be more cautious for the future, winding up with a prayer to her never again to go home in a strange gentleman's carriage, above all at so disreputable an hour of the night.

The flagrant misdemeanour of the heiress was the talk of her ladyship's little household from the attic to the scullery.

"How *could* Wallis suffer my dear Mdlle. de Malcé, under mamma's protection too, to leave this house at such an hour, without proper escort?" had indignantly asked Ellen Graham, of a young woman who served in the double capacity of waiting-maid to her, and housemaid in ordinary to the establishment.

"Well, Miss Graham, you see, 'tain't no manner of use a pore servant going agin the wishes of them as they serve. Mrs. Wallis, which have been your ma's confidential maid ever since you was first born, know'd as she didn't approve of that young lady's goings on. To be sure she is more like a angel than a female to look at, but 'andsome is as 'andsome does I say."

"Can it be possible that you are speaking thus of Mdlle. de Malcé, and to me, Mary?"

"Well, Miss Graham, fur be it from me to backbite hanybody, I'd sooner cut my tongue out, but nobody can't say as it hadn't a queer look, a young lady coming home at twelve o'clock at night, in a flash nobleman's carriage; Peter know'd the livery, likewise the coachman. Lord's sake, there ain't a more shocking fellow nor a more daringer than that Sir Arcut, I'd

no more trust myself a-nigh him than a mad bull, and they *do* say Mrs. Hamilton and Sir Arcut—”

“Mary, have done! I wish to know nothing about Mrs. Hamilton.”

“In course you don’t, miss, no blame to you neither, and I ain’t a going to talk to you about the likes of her. Your ma ’ud soon start me if she knowed as I said a word, only Mrs. Hamilton, which have been divorced from her lawful husband, and in course is no better than she should be—”

“We are none of us better than we should be, Mary.”

“Ain’t we though, miss? ain’t we? Indeed! I know my catechism, and the seventh commandment, which is more than the likes of her can say,” returned the offended abigail; “and Wallis, which have been brought up in truly Christian principles, says as she’d have no mercy on sich heathens; she’d skin ’em alive, she would. Then there’s that Mrs. Seymour, which they *do* say—”

“Who says?” interrupted her young lady, stamping her little foot; “who dares say wrong of Mdlle. de Malcé’s friends?”

“Well, Miss Graham, them as concerts with them in course don’t find no fault,” answered



the discomfited damsel, who had no idea of being so suddenly put down and pulled up, and was off again at a brisk canter. "'Onner among thieves, anyhow ; but folks don't go about with their heads tied up in a sack ; and a more cunninger thing than that Mrs. Seymour don't walk in shoe-leather, which treats a poor servant like dirt under her feet, and never gives a east dress till it's that shabby that there ain't a second-hand wardrobe-shop as 'ud give that for it," and the irate damsel fillipped her thumb and finger by way of illustrating her meaning ; "and my cousin James, leastways which have married my cousin Arabella, which was out of work, and is why she goes to service, and which is Mrs. Seymour's lady's maid, says the hundreds and hundreds of pounds she have wheedled that pore Miss Malcy out of, which could buy up the Bank of England easy, and is that soft-hearted she can't a-bear to see her a sobbing and a wringing of her hands as she does up in her bodwar."

Ellen rose. "Have done, I insist ; I am no longer a child, and expect to be obeyed, Mary. I cannot allow the distresses of any lady to be made the subject of vulgar comment," and the young lady quitted the room with something of the pride, and all the dignity of a Graham.

"Vulgar ! vulgar ! Well, I'm sure things

has come to a pretty pass. I'd like to know who ever see anything vulgar in Mary Simmons before? I never! If Miss Graham don't get the spit of her ma! It's them long frocks as she's took to as gives her them airs. But I'll give warning—vulgar! vulgar! If ever!"

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## CHAPTER V.

Thine image and my tears are left.

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It had baffled all but the immortal, though still unrecognized, author of the "Thousand and One Nights," adequately to have described the apartment which was more particularly appropriated to Mdlle. de Malcé's occupation; but its perfection may be conceived when it is remembered that the hand of taste, guided by love, presided over its appointments.

All that a princely spirit could supply was therein enshrined. Cabinets of the rarest gems from all quarters of the globe; bronzes, mosaics, marbles, and cameos were everywhere interspersed with Indian ivories of the most delicate workmanship; and vases of gold and silver elaborately carved and inwrought with precious

stones—chef-d'œuvres Cellini's self had not disdained to own as the work of his hands.

The first painters of the day had been called in to furnish subjects for the adornment of the panels of this fairy boudoir ; and exquisite alike in design and execution they were.

Here, bathed in richest sunlight, blushed the ripe corn-field of a Linnell, contrasting with the more sombre but scarce less lovely tints of a Creswick. Here, a Watteau transported you to another and sunnier land. Anon, your gaze lights upon that fairest of fair ideals, the enchanting Undine ; it represents her after her communion with Sir Huldebrand, when mind has commingled with the fantastic in her nature, and she is as much the tender woman as the tricksome sprite. From the pendent panel gleams forth Elmore's graver but not less lovely face of "Griselda," before sorrow and bitter wrong had so sorely wrung her true woman's heart.

In sculpture, ancient and modern art might seem to contest the supremacy. On a pedestal of oriental marble was Bayly's "Eve," and near it Foley's "Young Mother." By the master hand of this last, too, was a bust of Florence ; she had sat for it at the solicitation of Lord Castleton, who had a copy executed for himself. But that which more than all endeared this room to its fair owner, that which invested it with so

holy a character, was the noble whole length of her beloved father, which occupied one entire panel, a remarkably fine copy from the portrait of the count in the gallery at La Garde, which her guardian, in his thoughtful love, had commissioned to be taken, and sent over to England for her. A twofold charm was thus linked with this picture, the breathing image of a lost but idolized parent, the living memory of a not less idolized lover.

Perhaps the happiest (albeit saddened by a tender regret), certainly the most hallowed moments of the young orphan's life, were those spent in this room, when, alone with her memories of the living and the dead, she bent before that picture, and in fancy received a blessing from the benign lips. Fancy though it was, it left her in a happier and more tranquil spirit for the remainder of that day.

It was worthy of remark, or had been, if any had cared enough about the lonely girl to heed it, that she never knelt before that portrait when her heart, or rather her conscience, reproached her with the commission of any special act of indiscretion. Then she would turn, sighing, away, seating herself on the same side that she might not see those eyes bent on hers with their gaze of tender, pitying love. At other times, when that heart was light, she would

take her seat by the small oriel table in front of the picture—she is so seated now, but for once her eyes are not upon that dear face, they are fixed upon something she holds within her small white palms; she has drawn it by a slender golden chain from her bosom. It is a miniature of Lord Castleton, and as she contemplates the high and thoughtful brow, the grave yet earnest tenderness of the dark eyes, with the half sweet, half haughty smile of the lip, the impression of his natural sternness of character is deepened in her mind; but this sense, while it exalts her reverence, in no degree impairs her love for her future husband. Reverence is generally mixed up with a woman's love, if that love be of the true hue. But the reverie is disturbed.

The long French windows of the room open upon a conservatory, from which, by a short flight of steps, you alight on garden-ground tastefully laid out.

A pony-carriage, so minute in its proportions that Titania's self or the fairy Mab might be its owner, is gliding over the velvet lawn, and a sweet, clear voice calls to Florence.

It is Hope Beringford, who with a tiny boy for her page, or henchman, has driven over to whisper in the ear of her friend the sweetest of all sweet secrets in a true maiden's creed. Her bridal day is fixed. On the 20th of that month

she is to bid a lasting adieu to the name of Beringford. "And only just fancy, Flo, dear, to-day is the seventh, but twelve clear days; so inconsiderate of Norman. Pray, how does he suppose my trousseau can be ready? Yet there's mamma in an ecstasy of delight."

"While you, dear Hope, are, of course, 'high-proof melancholy.'"

"Of course, my dear."

And the music of their wild sweet laughter filled the room with its silvery sounds.

"Still I do think," demurred the bride-elect, "that Norman might have shown more consideration—though to let you into the true state of the case, Flo, milliners and dressmakers have been working for their lives these six weeks past. But I was very wrath at so much precipitation, you should have seen me,—and then the monster pleaded the ardour of his passion—his impatience to call me his own, his very own! Such tartufferie! when he knows he is only impatient to make sure of his cruise among the Greek islands before the September gales set in. He has built a love of a yacht which bears my name, of course—a good omen," and Hope enchanting smiled. "You must go and see it launched, Flory."

"And you have no fears?"

"What, of being capsized? not a chance of it!

with Norman, he is a perfect seaman ; never so much at home as when breasting the waves of a stormy sea."

And Miss Beringford raised her stately head some inches higher,—clearly Norman Paget was her top-gallant glory.

" Ah, Flo, darling, you are certainly what the world calls you, an angel, or you would never have lent fair ear to that ' Polar expedition ' of your lord's."

The young fiancée had run herself down, but if she had not, she had paused in very tenderness to her companion, whose violet eyes filled with tears at this allusion to the " Russian Embassy."

" Ah, Hope! if I could tell you how each day, each hour, I miss him more and more, his counsel, his support, his tenderness." And faster and faster flowed the tears.

" I can well believe it, pet, and though I would not own as much to any one else, I could not, now we are so soon to be the world to each other, part with my Norman—oh, not for a single day! and to think of six months, I should have wept myself to a Niobe in as many weeks. Nothing like tears, Flo. Many a noble galley has been warped from its course by the zephyr sigh of a Cleopatra."

" Ah, but Hope, dear, it was for his fame, his

honour, which ought to be dearer to me than my own selfish pleasure, that he should accept this high trust."

"Oh, I know, I know, lady-bird; and nobly he acquits himself of that trust, as you see by the public papers. I talked like a goose, or like a girl in love, it's all one—you see, 'I own the soft impeachment,' the rather that you, child, are in the same predicament. Well, it is confidently reported that six months will bring this momentous business to a close, and half that time has already expired, I suppose."

"Yes, more; three months and five days."

Miss Beringford laughed. "Why, as Fathom says, 'what a master of figures' thou hast become; you ought to hire yourself as clerk in a counting-house. Ah! now you smile, and I know my own bright Rosalind again. But, Flo, dear, what is this strange rumour floating over the atmosphere of fashionable folly, and of which you are the heroine?"

"Of which I am the heroine?"

"Yes, lady-bird, you; rumour speaks of your elopement from the opera a few evenings since with—with, I declare I forget the name of the gallant, though wiseacres shake their heads at it I know; but I assume it to be him with whom I saw you the night in question. Mamma is seriously annoyed at the buzz it has made."



"She is very good, but you see, Hope, you may safely contradict the report of my flight, since here I am;" but Florence looked disturbed nevertheless.

"Yes, that is true; but you can't stop the view-holloa of a popular slander—'cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war.' The dowagers are rolling their lack-lustre eyes, and consigning you, without benefit of clergy, to perdition."

"Oh, hush, dear Hope! will you listen to my exculpation?" and amidst a world of sighs, and tears, and blushes, Florence told all to her friend, all which she herself understood, for not a reflection was cast upon Lady Graham. Screened by her lofty character, she stood aloof from the world's censure, and here she was protected by her victim's simple faith and noble disposition; and yet, when the relation was ended, some vague doubts clouded her companion's mind.

In imitation of graver precedents, Miss Beringford shook her head.

"Strange! all very strange! Do you know I don't think, no, I am quite sure, I don't like your Lady Graham. Oh, you may open wide those heavenly eyes of yours, but I do declare most emphatically that she is not to my taste, I mistrust her; *you* mistrust no one, lady-bird, and that is just because, bred up in the country, you

know nothing of town life ; now I flatter myself I do know something of the world, enough to steer clear of these peccadillos. 'This is my second season's experience of the great 'vanity fair.' " And the novice of nineteen tried hard to look nine-and-twenty. Beyond a doubt, she felt three score.

But it was all one, the "country mouse" believed in the sagacity of the "town mouse" as implicitly as though she had been Athena's self, while Miss Beringford thought nineteen, and on the threshold of marriage too, fully qualified to sound the depths of the great ocean of human life.

"You see, dear, with three but very so-so brothers (for Miles is in Parliament, and Albert in the Guards, sorry schools for morality, I fancy), one learns a deal of mischief in more ways than one ; something, too, one learns of the aims and ends of social life. Now why does her ladyship everywhere deny your engagement to Lord Castleton? Expound me that riddle, fair Sphinx."

"Not deny it, dear Hope—that could she hardly do, though out of delicacy to me, I believe, she does not proclaim our engagement."

"Out of delicacy! Is there then aught of indelicacy in an engagement matrimonial, and of all men with my Lord Castleton, the first in worth and honour among our British nobles? A new lesson for the special enlightenment of maidens

and bachelors. So, so, perhaps that is why Master Norman is in such a hurry to shorten the term of ours, and harness me to the nuptial car. Delicacy forsooth ! I think I discern the faint impress of the serpent's tooth in this, and yet the motive is beyond me. It was the serpent that beguiled our first parent, you remember, my dear. Yet she can't want him herself, can she ? Ah, well, I am not the only one of our family that mistrusts her ladyship ; Albert, you know, bade you beware of bouquets as presents, unless you know the sender to be one of the lordly race. How amused he was at your simplicity in not deciphering his meaning."

"Yes, and I am still in the dark, Hope."

"That you are, you dear little novice, on this and many another point I opine. Ecoutez, carissima. Didst never hear of poison by the breath of flowers, or the perfume of a glove ? You are, in spite of your sire, so much more Saxon than Gallic, otherwise France has furnished a tolerably lengthy catalogue of this interesting species of murder, I fancy."

"Alas, yes ; still, Hope, who would want to poison me, and to what end ?"

"Ah, to what end ? as saith the royal Dane, 'that is the question.' Where shall we seek the answer ? Echo cries '*where*?' Lady, do you regularly and reverently attend divine worship ?"

"Wild girl! yes. Did you take me for a malignant and turbaned Turk?"

"Good; and do you there, after the old orthodox form, pray to be delivered from 'all envy, hatred, and malice?'"

"Even so; still I am too dull to catch your meaning."

"Yes, child, you are half a simpleton, I believe. There, go seek your answer in yonder mirror. Oh, you won't mend matters by blushing so divinely. What is there, you ask, in you to excite envy? Flo, Flo! did you not in your very first season, nay, even in irreverent anticipation of it, knock down the fair earldom of Castleton? could that stroke be surpassed, or could it be forgiven? Well, not content with this social coup d'état, you take the very citadel itself by storm, yoking to your triumphal car one half the picked men within it. Nay, never shake your golden locks at me; if you were not so lovable, and I myself disposed of, depend upon it, I should have prayed for your exile in company with his excellency, our ambassador at the court of St. Petersburg."

"But, indeed, dear Hope, I seek the conquest of no heart but one."

"The more likely to win them, my dear. Look at poor Hamilton, of the Guards; he has been sighing like a furnace ever since he beheld what

Norman styles your figure-head ; nor has the heir of the Beringfords come off quite scatheless."

"Nay, I appeal against this last indictment. Mr. Beringford's wound was so slight that a single smile from fair Alice Mordaunt sufficed to heal it. Spare me, Hope !"

Miss Beringford laughed a merry laugh. "Spare you, Hope ! Truly, a modest petition, when you leave none to any one else, man or woman ; yet I might perhaps have been merciful if the mischief had stopped here, but not content with these flesh wounds, you must needs cast your Circean spells over 'the Graham,' for whose fair barony all hearts were vainly sighing, and this Mercutio, this wildest of madcaps, is transformed into a love-sick Romeo. But, oh mercy ! here comes your grave castellan, Mrs. Stewart ! Mater Miserrimus, my Norman calls her. No, she has turned off, Dieu merci !"

"Is it by way of mortification for your sins that she is round and about your path for ever and aye ?"

"Indeed, Hope, she saves me from the commission of many."

"Ah ! she had need do something ; she would give me the vapours. You, so very a spirit of fun and frolic, to be doomed to companionship with such a death's-head and cross-bones. She

holds a hearty, wholesome laugh in the light of one of the seven deadly sins I expect. Seven is the mystic number, is it not?"

"Dear Hope, she is so good."

"Is she?"

"And bears so uncomplainingly with all my wilfulness."

"Does she?"

"Never checks, never chides me."

"Patient soul!"

"Provoking girl! But if you knew how more than indulgent she is to my faults, and ah, Hope! I have so many."

"Too true, pet, you have. Mais courage, good girls are the gorgons of social life. But do you know, lady mine, that mamma would not be so 'more than indulgent to your faults;' she would bid you correct them, ay, and see that you did so, too. No, sweet Rosalind, I do not affect your paragon."

"Dear Hope."

"And dear Florence."

"But if you better knew her."

"Thanks; I do not ambition a more extensive acquaintance; the savage respectability of the Presbyterian is not to my taste, yet as a disciple of the 'Graham' fraternity I suppose she must be borne with."

"No, indeed, Lady Graham never saw her

till they met beneath this roof. No, her ladyship was strangely cold in her interest, and still is, I fear."

"Then her ladyship exhibits her wonted subtlety of discrimination. Now discrimination is not your forte."

"But tell me on what grounds you object to Mrs. Stewart?"

As Florence put this question Miss Beringford stood gazing down upon the weird figure of the lady in question, who was now leaning against the balustrade. The face, though slightly turned off, in something it might strike you of a listening attitude, was yet clearly defined against the blue sky. The young girl smiled, and shook her head.

"The reason why I cannot tell,  
But I don't like you, Dr. Fell."

"But Flo, dear, do you know this Mrs. Stewart's face is strangely familiar to me; it reminds me of some one whom I have met, though I cannot recall the when, or where."

"How strange!" returned Florence; "the same impression, the same resemblance to some one has struck me; at times it is startling, it haunts me like a dream."

"Haunts indeed! The woman glides about more like a spectre than a thing of warm flesh

and blood—your ‘Castle Spectre,’ Flo. But oh Neptune! she is coming now in good earnest.”

And the two girls stepped back into the room, Florence laughing at her friend’s sudden adoption of nautical phraseology.

“And now, carissima mia, fare’well. Other visitors have arrived, I see,” and Miss Beringford took the card from the page, who had just entered, and handed it to Florence.

“But are you going so soon, dear?”

“So soon! I shall have to borrow some of your bewildering smiles to propitiate the gallant captain of the ‘Hope’ for having left him so long. Ah, pretty bondage! no longer ‘queen o’er myself.’ Run to your visitors, dear. Good-bye; I will but stay to cut one of your lovely white camelias for my ebon tresses.”

But when Florence was gone the young lady seemed to have forgotten the camelia in the contemplation of the card she had handed to her friend a minute before, and which she now caught up. She had moved within the embrasure of the window, the card still in her hand, as Mrs. Stewart, without perceiving her, entered the room.

Wearily the woman sunk into the nearest chair; heavily, oh, so heavily, she sighed! As her arms, with an expression of positive pain in them, fell to her side, a more piteous image of a



sorrow-laden, broken-spirited woman was never contrasted with a blooming, light-hearted bride-elect.

Miss Beringford's kind heart smote her for all she had somewhat flippantly said in her disfavour.

Why, for what reason did she presume to dislike this woman, who seemed so woful sad, and who had in no way injured her, and to whose gentleness and forbearance her friend had just borne such warm testimony? The young are quick to receive impressions whether of love or hate, but no less quick, if generous, to atone for a misapprehension, and Hope Beringford *was* generous. With frank cordiality she advanced towards Mrs. Stewart, who, startled at sight of her, drew back with visible alarm, alarm at what she might unconsciously have betrayed.

Unlike Florence, whose soft, warm heart ignored all distinctions of rank, Miss Beringford attached, perhaps, an undue importance to them. It was seldom that she forgot she *was* Miss Beringford, but her pride had not a particle of littleness in it, and though that very pride had led her to regard the person she now addressed in the light of a dependent, her high-bred courtesy instinctively taught her what was due to one, and her manner, and even the tone of her voice, were not alone suave, but apologetic, as she took the companion's hand.

"Will Mrs. Stewart," said she, "suffer me to thank her for the indulgence I have just learned she shows to Mdlle. de Malcé, and will she extend her indulgence to me, and forgive my freedom if I venture to say that I do not think Mdlle. de Malcé's best friends would like to see her in company with this lady?" and Miss Beringford pointed to the card bearing the name of Mrs. Seymour. "I am young, perhaps presumptuous, Mrs. Stewart, in touching upon such a matter," and the cheek of the beautiful girl deepened to the hue of carnation; "but though young, I am yet old enough to know that a woman's reputation is so fragile a thing that it may not be made the sport of a censorious world, even for an hour, with impunity. You forgive me, do you not?" and Miss Beringford pressed the hand which she had in her earnestness, perhaps unconsciously retained; but before the lady, so strangely taken aback by this address, could improvise her answer, she found herself alone.

Who said that Mrs. Stewart could not smile? If Hope Beringford had seen the bitter, mocking one on the ashen lip of that lady as the door closed after her, she had acknowledged her error.

And yet the bitterness and the mockery were against herself for the double part she was

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acting ; towards these innocent girls she felt no bitterness.

"They call upon me," she exclaimed, wringing her hands, "to save, and I—I am sworn to betray her."

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## CHAPTER VI.

Tell me, pr'ythee, which is likelier  
To plough a sea in safety ? He not wont  
To sail in it, or he that by the chart  
Is master of its soundings, bearings—knows  
Its headlands, havens, currents—where 'tis bold,  
And where behoves to keep a good look-out ?  
The one will swim where sinks the other.

SHERIDAN KNOWLES.

A SPLENDID entertainment given by Mdle. de Malcé at her villa at Twickenham, in honour of her friend's nuptials, was but the inauguration of a series that had half beggared a revenue less princely than that of the opulent heiress of La Garde ; but in truth, as we have already said, that princely revenue, though she herself was in profound ignorance of the fact, was, to an inconceivable extent, supplied from her guardian's. At first Lady Graham was as innocent of this fact as herself ; but infinitely more astute, her suspicions were quickly aroused,

and, being aroused, it was not long before she fathomed the mystery of these never empty coffers.

To one no less subtle than determined, it was not a matter of vast difficulty to ascertain almost to a nicety the rent-roll of the heiress, and her surprise was only equal to her mortification on the discovery that it was, after all, but a moderate one; for from whence, then, but from the woods and forests of Oatlands, Deerhurst, Elm Court, &c., could be derived the inexhaustible mines of wealth which the lady scattered like chaff before the wind?

And well, indeed, might my Lady Graham break into denunciations on the inconsistency of man, and of Lord Castleton in especial, under the dominion of passion, for surely woman-worship never before reached such a climax.

No marvel the prodigal boasted to the hundred dear friends who preyed upon her bounty, that her exchequer was beyond the reach of bankruptcy, that she nothing doubted that the same genii that befriended Fortunatus rained golden showers into her treasury.

But there is a limit to all things; the boy who travelled so far to find a stick with only one end, never, we believe, succeeded in his search; and the rent-roll of the first territorial magnate in the kingdom is not without an end as a

sequence to a beginning, and so, ample as was that of the Earl of Castleton, the late demands had proved a heavy drain upon it, and continued at the same ratio, must ultimately occasion at least a temporary embarrassment.

To this, however, on his own account, his lordship had never given a thought, but for *her* dear sake it had become manifestly incumbent upon him to interpose some check, and at last a gentle remonstrance reached her, not, indeed, bearing so much upon the almost fabulous extent of her outlay, as praying her to moderate something of the excess of gaiety into which she had lately plunged.

Lady Graham was not much at fault when she stigmatized as the culmination of human folly the great statesman's inordinate indulgence of his ward.

Could madness itself have lent its sanction to a step more fraught with peril to a young girl standing alone in the world than that of unlimited credit at her bankers'?

What was it but a premium on the most reckless extravagance, and in the workings of that extravagance, a lure to boundless dissipation.

Its danger had formerly been pointed out to Lord Castleton by Malgrove, and in deference to his friend's advice, the supplies had been in a degree moderated. But when about to be sepa-

rated from his ward, prudence, reason, all gave way before the potency of a love that seemed seeking fresh channels for the vent of its fathomless depth and tenderness.

He had beggared himself, coined his very heart into gold, could he thereby have increased by one jot her store of happiness.

One plea, and one alone, could be set up in defence of this excess of folly on the part of his lordship; this was, that with regard to Lady Graham, to whose guardianship he had consigned his idol, he entertained, in common with the world, the most exalted opinion. As a woman of austere virtue and strict principle, he conceived her to be without a peer. How then could it enter his imagination that she would countenance an expenditure now become positively criminal?

Of her ladyship's abuse of her trust, it might, to quote the words of Elia, be said to be "a consummate villany, entrapping a noble nature into toils against which no discernment was available, where the manner was as fathomless as the purpose seemed dark and without motive."

To her legitimate and delegated authority over his young ward, Lord Castleton naturally looked for any reasonable check alike upon her extravagance and the dissipation to which it led.

But few, perhaps, were less capable of poisoning

the balance between a liberal and even profuse outlay, and an absolutely prodigal one, than my Lord Castleton, whose princely spirit had at no period of his life been curbed.

He delighted in the munificent and refined tastes of his ward, delighted still more in the warmth and generosity of her heart. To him, the tender pitifulness of a nature that sought to raise up the poor and oppressed, was worthy of the wild worship wherewith it was worshipped, and he joyed to shower down golden treasures upon her for its uncontrolled exercise.

And true it was that Flôrence de Malcé did find her dearest happiness in deeds of mercy. If she bestowed countless gold and gems upon the vain and mercenary, or expended hundreds upon a single night's revel, none could say that the calls of humanity were sacrificed to them. They might be said to bear about an equal proportion with her acts of rash extravagance, or thoughtless generosity.

But the awakening from her day-dream was at hand. Strong as was her faith in human goodness, shadows, numerous as Banquo's issue, were rising before her startled sight. Favour abused, trust betrayed, and last, worst shock of all, the sting of ingratitude; from this last pang her bright and elastic spirit was slow to recover, but not even the conviction so tardily admitted, so

tearfully mourned over, that the idol her fancy or her credulity had erected to its high place lay shattered at the pedestal's base, that the Hon. Mrs. Seymour was false-hearted and light of fame, could unseat her faith in that lady's boon companion, Mrs. Hamilton; and so the dangerous intimacy between her and this last continued without let or hindrance, nay, was tacitly encouraged by the perfidious Lady Graham, and her less culpable agent, Mrs. Stewart, for the former affected ignorance of the intimacy altogether till forced to see and denounce it.

Her ladyship lost a valuable ally in speeding the ruin of her victim, in the ex-mistress of Hawley Park, but that lady's conduct had of late become so notorious that she was fain to make a virtue of necessity, and in anticipation of the cannonade she knew to be in active preparation for her at Beringford House, order the name of Mrs. Seymour to be struck off Mdlle. de Malcé's visiting list; affecting to be infinitely shocked at Mrs. Stewart's culpable imprudence in having permitted the intimacy with a woman of such equivocal repute. She concluded her severe strictures on the companion by requiring from Mdlle. de Malcé its immediate renunciation.

To her surprise (for she never seemed fully to realize the impression of the angelic sweetness of Florence's disposition) she was met (after an



unqualified and generous exculpation of Mrs. Stewart) by instant submission, accompanied by many contrite tears; for in addition to the weight of her ladyship's arguments, Florence was still smarting from the effects of Stratford's last letter. It had been so full of love-breathing tenderness and trust in her, that between that tender trust and the sense of her having so ill requited it, her heart was half broken.

Conscience whispered how little, not to go beyond the renewal of this pernicious and forbidden intimacy with Mrs. Seymour, she had deserved this generous forbearance. To the anxious pleadings of that devoted guardian she had formerly refused its sacrifice, and now the unpardonable levity of the lady's conduct, drawing all eyes to her, constrained her into making it for very shame.

The chain had once been snapped asunder; why were the broken links reunited? Why, indeed? The clever aide-de-camp of the yet cleverer General Graham had been best able to answer that interrogatory.

It became now somewhat clearer to Florence's apprehension why many whom she both loved and revered had of late either kept wholly aloof, or had met her advances by a constrained and distant courtesy, often only by a formal inclination of the head, or an affectation of not

seeing her at all. Unconscious of the meaning of these slights, the poor girl had, one day, with tear-clouded eyes, complained to Ellen Graham, whom she now rarely saw, of these last species of indignity, the worst, perhaps, the pretence of not seeing you, from a lady for whom she entertained feelings of the warmest regard.

"Don't you think, Flory, dear, it might perhaps be because you were with Mrs. Seymour at the time?" was the timidly whispered reply of the blushing girl.

"Ah, well!" she argued, "this was but one instance of betrayed trust, she might never meet with another; no one was so blest in dear and tried friends."

And so on she went, "giving all, forgiving all," and alas! "trusting all."

Nevertheless, life seemed changing to her, "the warp of sadness evermore crossing her woof of gladness."

Slower grew her once bounding step, less and less elastic her hitherto gay spirits. She smiled still, but her smiles were for the outer world, her tears and sighs for her pillow.

The glitter of that world could still afford delight, but that delight was transient; its homage still gratify, but one murmured word of approval from her guardian, or even from the sacred monitor within, had been worth it all.

Ah ! had she but more frequently listened to that inward monitor, for it was all on which she had now to rely ! She who was ever near and about her path, ostensibly filling the office of counsellor and guide, was but her ladyship's decoy-duck.

How often had Florence flown to her for advice or sympathy, and been chilled into silence by her cutting reserve. That affection for her was wanting, who might so readily discern as she, whose feeling heart looked with love on all created things, and who now in her loneliness so more than ever yearned for sympathy ? On one occasion, Florence had been painfully conscious that Mrs. Stewart had even started at her caress, nay, had shudderingly recoiled from it.

And this was true ; the woman *had* recoiled at the pressure of those soft lips, their touch had been as coals of living fire ; but the unsuspecting girl could form no surmise of the truth. She could never dream that it arose out of a sense of shame on receiving marks of love and trust from the being whom she was at that self-same moment plotting to betray.

And yet was not this woman a hypocrite by nature, nor, though strangely undemonstrative and reserved, altogether unaffectionate ; and if she had been this last, the coldest heart had

surely warmed to so much compassionate love, and tender respect, as were lavished upon her by the beautiful and high-born girl, always so oblivious of the social distinction between them.

That some secret sorrow lay beneath this cold and constrained demeanour, Florence could not doubt, but all efforts to win her to confidence were fruitless; a wintry smile would indeed sometimes light up the marble features in requital, but it only served the more forcibly to betray the darkness and desolation within.

The serf, the miserable serf of her haughty relative; bound to her by a promise which the rigid creed of the Calvinist taught her to regard with an austere sanctity from which there was no appeal, where was her chance of recovered peace, where the chance of emancipation from this thralldom?

Deplorable sophistry! that can call it virtue to follow up one crime by the commission of a legion. Your oath must be kept, though the service of the foul-fiend be required of you in obedience to that oath.

Thus when Florence, startled by some light remarks of Sir Harcourt Neville, sought Mrs. Stewart's opinion in the matter, she gave it so decidedly in the baronet's favour, that ever after in society Florence rather courted than shunned

him, holding herself his debtor for more than one act of chivalrous courtesy.

Again, in the case of Mrs. Seymour, prior to the present rupture—if the verdict had not been altogether a lenient one, it had certainly been as little condemnatory, the while knowing that it was death to the reputation of the good and pure to be recognized as her companion. And now this cold deliberate system of treachery was beginning to tell upon the fair name of Florence in the eyes of the ultra good. Already too she had plunged deeply in debt, and deeper and deeper was she likely to become involved. Tradespeople are far too civil to clamour for payment of their bills when their creditors are rich heiresses—till the crash comes.

It was a part of the diabolical policy of her ladyship to keep her victim in ignorance of the state of her exchequer in order to entangle her beyond the possibility of extrication without exposure to her guardian; for that, however, matters were not as yet ripe—"Pelion must be heaped on Ossa, and Ossa on Olympus" ere the coup-de-grâce could be given. If she could but succeed in sufficiently blackening the young lady's character the "coup" would come from his lordship—but just at present the explosion would make little more noise than a boy's pop-gun.

Well, Lady Graham was sowing the whirlwind, yet she herself might reap the fruits.

“The best laid schemes o’ mice and men gang aft a-gley.”

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## CHAPTER VII.

*Heartwell.*—If you would train a maid to live in town  
Breed her not in the country.

*Master Walter.*—Stands she not the test?

*Heartwell.*—As snow stands fire!  
Your country maid has melted all away,  
And plays the city-lady to the height.

SHERIDAN KNOWLES.

BUT a month, a single month remained to the period when it might confidently be expected that the Earl of Castleton would bid adieu to the Russian Court.

The public journals teemed with panegyrics on the successful issue of an embassy so ably and so expeditiously conducted, and heralded the great statesman’s return with demonstrations of the highest satisfaction.

And the lady of his love, whose welcome should have been the warmest of all—did she hail his advent with joy and gladness? Ay did she, from the innermost depths of a heart wholly and solely devoted to him; but fear and

trembling mingled with her joy—for ah! of what unnumbered follies had she not been guilty! It was not his frown, but that anguished look of wordless woe which she had once, and but once before, seen on that beloved face from which she shrunk shivering and abashed.

Nor was Florence the only one who trembled at his lordship's return, trembled lest her scheme for his ward's destruction should be but midway accomplished; for what would it avail that accumulated debts and heavy obligations were incurred, if nothing more flagrant stood in array against her; for these he might thank his own senseless indulgence, and these at worst would be set down to youth and inexperience, and after a few tears shed upon his bosom be forgiven, and the culprit loved worshippingly as ever.

But Lady Graham was the last woman in the world to throw up the game while a single possibility in favour of ultimate success remained to her. In one particular she had erred in her estimate of *Mdlle. de Malcé*. From the exceeding softness of her disposition she had not given her credit for the latent spirit that softness disguised; again, too, she had assigned to her an amount of vanity to which she had little or no title. She had assumed that she would

be intoxicated by the incense offered to her rare loveliness, and to a certain extent it cannot be reasonably doubted that such was the case, but it had not, as her ladyship sanguinely expected, led her from the paths of innocence; so tempered, indeed, by modesty was each look and gesture of the young fiancée, that though popularly hailed queen of the laughing throng, none had ever taxed her sprightliest humour with a spark of levity. This exquisite modesty constituted her guard of honour.

Then, again, was her ladyship thrown out by the soulless way in which her kinswoman and purchased slave performed her part of the compact, one which had for its special end the ruin of her detested rival.

Lady Graham was too acute not to perceive that though the work she had bargained for was in a measure performed, it was performed sorely against the grain, and under protest; that the hireling in short loathed the task assigned her, and had freely given all she possessed, even the prospect of her son's advancement, to be well quit of it. By virtue of her oath alone was she bound.

She noted too with all a jealous woman's deadly hate, that even against her own volition the fascinations of Florence de Malcé were slowly but surely winding their way to the arid and



impassive bosom of the puritan, paralyzing her every faculty to injure her. No, there was no life in her labour.

The woman wore, too, a cowed and startled look, especially when unexpectedly broken in upon; there were moments, indeed, when her intellects seemed wandering, and she would mutter strange incoherent sentences. Her religion was a gloomy one, breathing rather of hell than heaven; what if in a mind at once morbid and superstitious it should lead to a betrayal of their guilty complicity?

After all her best chance of success, her ladyship began to suspect, lay in the imprudence of the unfortunate girl herself, who, so far from slackening pace at the near prospect of her guardian's return, seemed rather to have acquired fresh zest for every idle and extravagant pleasure; or was it that an alarmed and upbraiding conscience, a feverish unrest, drove her into them to drown the agony of thought? Anyway, fêtes, routs, and balls made up the round of her life. More than ever was she the talk of the town, more than ever courted, but, alas! more than ever condemned by all whose verdict was of real worth.

The consummation of madness was, however, yet to come, and come it did all too soon. As if enough of human folly had not been crowded

into the five months' absence of her guardian, the worst, touching even the confines of guilt—gaming, was now to be linked to the catalogue of her offences.

What mattered it that she was artfully inveigled into play?—that she felt not a shadow of interest in the game either as a pastime or a profit? to her who sought her downfall it sufficed that far and wide, ay, even to the shores of the Baltic, Mdlle. de Malcé should be proclaimed a gamester, a character in a woman which she knew Lord Castleton held in the deepest abhorrence.

Yes, *now* she could write to him; at last she had tangible grounds of complaint against her victim. She could lament this fatal infatuation of his ward in her next communication to his lordship, and—oh, delicious climax!—she could add that it was to Sir Harcourt Neville that the sums were lost. Sir Harcourt! the last man in the world with whom a young and affianced lady would care to have her name associated.

Yes, Florence de Malcé rose one night from the gaming-table, the debtor of the gay baronet to a frightful amount, and urged on by the fiend-agent of Lady Graham, who was opposite her, she insanely betted with those around her on the chances of that very game, of which she was nearly as ignorant as of the character of

her prompter. The warning voice that at length stopped her in her madness was that of the winner himself.

And this circumstance, this heavy debt to him it was, or the results, rather, accruing from it, that at last startled the rash girl out of her day-dream of security.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

The bark was launch'd on a summer sea,  
A summer sea and a smiling sky ;  
Never a ripple and never a frown,  
Never a token of shipwreck nigh—  
What did it matter ?—the bark went down.

ANXIOUS, painfully anxious to discharge her heavy obligations to Sir Harcourt, at an early hour on the following morning Mdle. de Malcé sent to her bankers.

Her messenger returned, and her cheque returned too,—it was dishonoured. The politest of notes intimated that she had “already considerably overdrawn.” Indeed she had, very, very considerably, or such intimation had never been made. The courtesy of bankers is proverbial.

Alarmed, and strangely perplexed, the novice in business matters was still far from being

awake to all the horrors of her position as an insolvent. "Her cheque uncashed!—payment refused! What did it,—what could it mean? Had her bankers stopped payment? she had heard of such disasters. Her imprudent and unfortunate friend, Mrs. Seymour, had lost unknown sums by a bank failure"—unknown indeed but to the fabricator of the said sums. She reconsidered their letter; no, brief but official, it was conclusive as to her own deficit.

Florence now recalled some faint memory of a former communication containing a similar intimation, but Mrs. Stewart had assured her it was "of no manner of importance, a mere form," and as the supplies continued, the warning was unheeded, and the same senseless round of folly speeded the road to ruin. And now the bubble had burst—the *ondée d'or* had suddenly ceased.

Earlier than her usual visiting hour Lady Graham presented herself in Eaton Place. With a secret throb of exultation she noted the pallid cheek of the agitated girl as she handed her the letter of Messrs Fenton & Co., and eagerly inquired the meaning of so extraordinary a communication.

"I see nothing extraordinary in the communication, *Mdlle. de Malcé*," and the letter was handed back.

"Then your ladyship would imply there is

nothing in it,—nothing very particular I mean ?”

“Nothing more particular than insolvency.”

“Ah, but only for a day or two,—there will be oceans of money in a day or two ?”

“If you have a gold mine on your landed estate, yes.”

“Then your ladyship *does* think this letter may mean——”

But, provoked by such amazing simplicity, or unable longer to restrain her coming triumph, her ladyship put a stop to further conjecture in the matter.

“It means, Mdlle. de Malcé, that you have no effects at your bankers’. Have had none for some time past, perhaps.”

“No effects, madam ?”

“No effects.”

“I am afraid I do not quite catch your ladyship’s meaning.”

“And are you so dull, Mdlle. de Malcé, as to fail to perceive that your shameless extravagance has at last beggared you, and in all probability, since further supplies are stopped, your guardian also ?”

The girl started as though she had been shot.

“My guardian ! My guardian, madam !—beggared by me !”

“Your guardian, Mdlle. de Malcé.”

"Merciful powers ! am I going mad ? The Earl of Castleton ! my guardian !"

"I believe his lordship rejoices in the distinction that title confers."

"Did I understand your ladyship to say that, —but no, I have dreamed it—yet, oh ! for sweet mercy's sake explain the meaning of those dreadful words !"

"I should have conceived such words explained themselves."

"But you said —oh, in pity say you did not !—that my shameless extravagance had beggared my guardian."

"Precisely ; for the time being beyond a doubt ; I retract no one tittle of these words—your own income being wholly inadequate to meet the exorbitant demands made on it, his lordship's has been drained to supply the deficiency."

"Oh heavens !" gasped forth the unhappy girl, clinging to a chair for support, "do you mean that any part of my revenue has been derived from his lordship's ?"

"I do, Mdle. de Malcé ; I repeat most emphatically, that Lord Castleton's coffers have from first to last been taxed to support your senseless profusion. His gold has replenished your exhausted resources—*his* gold has paid your creditors."

"And my own fortune ?"

"Your account at Storr and Mortimer's alone must have well-nigh swallowed that up—its annual yield I mean."

A fearful light was breaking in upon the spendthrift.

"And you knew this, Lady Graham! you knew this, yet by no word or sign would stay me in my frantic career, would not tell me I was a pensioner upon my guardian's bounty. Oh, but this is cruel!"

And the young girl wrung her hands in all the abandonment of an anguished and outraged spirit, humbled to the very dust by this revelation.

Had she only involved herself it might—it could have been borne; she had regarded her sore tribulation as a just retribution. But him! "Oh, Stratford! too kind, too generous! Blind! blind, till now!" she murmured. "But he shall know all—all my miserable, guilty sin. I will pour out my whole soul at his feet, he will yet pity and forgive me."

Could that young trembling girl have beheld the sneering lip and flashing eye that greeted these words of tender sorrow and remorse, could she have known how much they helped to precipitate her fall—but she did not know this!

"You appear to forget, Mdlle. de Malcé, that a considerable time must elapse before you can

enact the rôle of the weeping Magdalen, almost as long a time before any remittance, or order on his banker for fresh supplies to your ruined finances can reach you from his lordship; meanwhile your so-called debt of honour to the baronet remains unliquidated, and remaining so, involves an obligation on your part which nice minds would be chary of incurring. True, Sir Harcourt is too courtly a gallant to dun you for the settlement of his claim, or post you as a defaulter. 'Hommage aux dames' forbids; but these matters are always arranged, I have been given to understand, on the spot; any delay must in a lady's case prove fatal to her reputation."

With a low wail the girl sunk to the ground.

"Nay, Mdle. de Malcé, suppress these paroxysms, I beseech you; from a sentimental point of view I have really no sympathy with them. That his lordship, in his capacity of guardian, will discharge your gambling debts, especially in the case of so notorious a profligate as Sir Harcourt, so soon as he is in receipt of your *application* for the means, I will not permit myself to question; but bear in mind you have other creditors; will they, think you, be equally complaisant? for your liabilities, I am told, are something frightful."

Now each minute section of this speech did,



as it was designed it should, its work upon the lacerated heart of the unfortunate girl. Her piteous gaze was rivetted on her ladyship's face with an expression that had half broken the heart of any other bearing the shape of woman.

"Have mercy, Lady Graham!" she cried wildly, and with uplifted hands; "I know you never loved me—would never, alas! suffer me to love you, but have pity now! Forgive! and, oh! if it be possible, help me—counsel me in this dire strait, for I cannot—oh, *I cannot sink so low as to ask alms of Lord Castleton!*"

"You do well, Mdlle. de Malcé, least of all for such a purpose; for if I know anything of his lordship, and I should do so, for we have been as most dear and confidential friends almost from childhood (her ladyship's mendacity was unique), he will never, never pardon a gamester; but as yet you are safe. Happily for your credit, his return is involved in some uncertainty."

This too was false, but oh, how Florence paled and trembled at these words of the temptress.

"Ah, yes; but my guardian must know all my mad, wicked folly, I should but double my guilt by any attempt at subterfuge."

"Wisely resolved; I but suggest with a view

to save you from his lordship's contempt. Let him but know you for a gamester, and you and he are parted for ever."

A faint but smothered cry broke from her victim ; and yet, though doom was in those words, "you are parted for ever !" after a brief struggle she rallied her sinking courage. Her love was so true and tender—her trust in him so strong and undoubting.

"I *should* thank your ladyship, I know, for not seeking to lull me into false security ; but I dare not—if I would not quite lose my senses—I dare not cast from me all hope of pardon ; yet come what may, my resolve is taken to have no more concealments from him. If I can but in some degree redeem the miserable past ! Oh, Lady Graham, if you would speak but one—one little word of hope—of pity—of mercy !"

But there came no sound, or of hope, or pity, or compassionating mercy, only a derisive smile curled those stony lips Medusa's self might have envied ; but that smile the penitent did not see, for at the dead silence that followed her appeal she flung her head upon her folded arms and wept, wept as only the very young do weep, wildly, convulsively, with heart-piercing sighs and sobs.

In after years sorrow takes deeper root ; *that*

sorrow, alas, is seldom exhaled by tears ! The debt to Sir Harcourt, as her ladyship well knew, could readily enough have been discharged, but it was her policy to magnify the difficulty. It was but one among a host far more considerable in amount. When hundreds and hundreds are expended in the idle pageant of a night, no marvel the sum total speedily swells into thousands ; but Florence had been so accustomed to deal with thousands and tens of thousands, that as her ladyship, in the course of that same evening, ran over the various undischarged accounts handed in by the *honest* steward, referring more than once to as many more yet to be called in, the prodigal was more aghast at her inability to meet the demand than shocked or astounded at their gross amount. Of the real intrinsic value of money she had as much idea as the traditionary man in the moon, but as her senses slowly took in the bald, broad fact, that with debts of many thousands of pounds she was not in actual possession of as many shillings for their liquidation, her alarm grew intense. Keenly, most keenly she felt the humiliation of her position, bitterly she mourned her past folly ; but trials and difficulties are the true touchstones of character.

“The good are better made by ill,  
As odours crush’d are sweeter still.”

And if the spoiled favourite of fortune did not prove herself quite equal to the emergency—for she was, alas, no heroine—most certainly she met it in the fair and honourable spirit of a reasonable and reasoning woman, resolute so far as lay within her power to do the right thing—at last.

Truly a “reasonable woman” was a new rôle for the fair heiress to appear in.

The immediate dismissal of her household was the first step decided on.

“It shall be broken up this day—this very day.”

“Your establishment cannot be thus summarily disposed of, Mdlle. de Malcé; under existing circumstances the thing is simply impossible. Your steward will best help to enlighten you on that head.”

“Yet it appears to me, Lady Graham, that honour and honesty imperiously demand it.”

“*Honour, and honesty!* Did Mdlle. de Malcé say honour—honesty?”

Oh, the withering sarcasm embodied in those two words! The scorching cruelty conveyed by the gesture that accompanied them!

Why, the simple pathos of the position had awakened some one grain of sympathy in the coldest breast. Her ladyship was superior to such weakness.

“Household servants, Mdlle. de Malcé, are

sometimes so unreasonable as to expect payment from their employers."

"Oh, yes! poor things! poor things! Each one shall have a year's surplus!"

"And the funds for this surplus, to the countless members of such an establishment as yours?"

It could not be denied that the fair insolvent looked a trifle disconcerted.

"But I will dispose of my jewels, instantly,—this very day."

"A reputable measure, truly."

"Ah, madam! now I know my duty; nothing, nothing shall henceforth tempt me to flinch from performing it."

The young lady's impulses were all for good; it was her logic that was so defective.

"I know nothing, Mdlle. de Malcé, on which, theoretically, so much cant is daily expended as on this so-called 'sense of duty'—its practice is altogether another matter. Supreme in wisdom, *you* may nevertheless unite the two. Supported by his lordship, you have hitherto played the millionaire,—with what unprecedented éclat the exhausted state of your exchequer triumphantly attests. You have now to appear before your creditors in a different character—in formâ pauperis, in fact."

The heightened colour and quivering lip of

the ex-millionaire, as she had been styled, testified to her appreciation of the delicacy of her ladyship's exposition, if its soundness lay open to question.

"I will appear before my creditors, madam, only as a just paymaster ; not one shall suffer from my heedless—oh, worse than heedless—criminal folly. This house shall at once be given up, and the furniture sold—pictures, statues, plate, porcelain, everything. Everything," she continued, with a sudden burst of tears, "but the appointments of my boudoir ; that room must be held sacred, for in that room hangs my father's picture. It is a hallowed spot to me. Oh, how have I profaned it !"

Triumphant in the torture she was inflicting, her ladyship raised her eye-glass, and with the air of a connoisseur scanned the splendour of the apartment in which they sat.

"It is clear how little you comprehend the difference between buying and selling, Mdlle. de Malcé. Even this sacrifice will fall very far short of the claims on your estate."

"Then must *his* gift, the villa at Twickenham, be surrendered !"

How heavy was the sigh that accompanied this declaration, how hueless the lip from which it issued."

"And the world, *Mdlle. de Malcé*,—what, think you, will be the verdict of the world?"

"I have done with the world, madam."

"The world, be sure, will have done with you after so disgraceful an exposé."

"And will the world cast me off for the only act for which I need not blush? It is well, then, that I know it at last, at its true worth. Henceforth I will regulate my conduct by a higher standard than its applause."

In mute and mortified surprise, her ladyship gazed at the so lately child-girl, now the resolved woman; not calm and self-possessed, nor altogether courageous; it had been foreign to a nature so soft and pliant as hers to be either, but strong in the dignity of a settled purpose, and a noble one too.

Her ladyship rose; Florence, too, rose. She laid her hand timidly upon her ladyship's. "You will aid me to negotiate this business, Lady Graham?"

"*Mdlle. de Malcé*, I am nearly as much a novice in such matters as yourself. I never had to make a compromise with my creditors. My whole annual income would barely suffice for the disbursement of your milliner's bill, yet within the limits of that income I have happily always lived."

The spendthrift hung her head abashed.

"Happily indeed, and worthily; while I, with the revenue of a prince, am reduced to beggary. How deeply I feel my degradation words would fail me to express; yet, oh, Lady Graham, do not, do not abandon me in this extremity!"

Again the little, pale hands were raised and clasped beseechingly, and the eyes flooded in tears rivetted on her ladyship's face.

Ah, may we not with an eloquent writer exclaim, "Oh, wife and mother! Is there no appeal to your common womanhood here!"

Will you suffer this poor little bleeding heart to go on bleeding, "starv'd to more sinning by thy savage ban?"

Even so; what recked she that a broken heart might be laid at her door?

What was it the helpless girl read in the expression of that beautiful face that she so suddenly dropped those locked hands, as a sharp, swift thrill of anguish went shivering through every fibre of her frame?

Instead of the answering gleam of sympathy she so yearned for, a fiend-like triumph flashed from out the magnificent eyes; such triumph as only the Evil spirit might be supposed capable of displaying towards a defenceless and fallen foe.

With a smothered cry she sunk to the ground, hiding her eyes from the withering sight.



The next moment the sound of carriage wheels told her she was alone. "God help me to do right," she sobbed forth, "for I must do something, and quickly. Oh, Stratford! why, why did you leave me to myself?"

When next they met, that wily lady and her victim, the settlement of the bankrupt's affairs was virtually decided. Treason had done its worst!

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## CHAPTER IX.

Lay thy account to live  
A smileless life, die an unpitied death—  
Abhor'd, abandon'd of thy kind,—as one  
Who had the guarding of a young maid's peace,—  
Look'd on, and saw her rashly peril it;—  
And when she saw her danger, and confess'd  
Her fault, compell'd her to complete her ruin!

KNOWLES.

THEY were hard harsh lines the young prodigal was now so persistently conning, but they were wholesome ones. She was being made wiser by that sad wisdom which experience alone can teach. And yet she never seemed to think that any other than herself could be in the wrong—she blamed none but herself for the huge mass of difficulties in which she was

involved, nor was she perhaps much at fault in so doing; her own indiscretions had furnished the handle by which her implacable foe was enabled to accomplish her ruin. With a Constance Greville such a consummation had been simply impossible.

The whole night succeeding that most dismal day on which Florence had been so rudely awakened from her dream of security, she sat before a pile of unpaid bills, trying, in emulation of Dora, to add them up, with the view of arriving at even a remote notion of the sum total.

Not a whit enlightened by her labours, morning found her weak and weary indeed, but still strong in her resolve to make restitution at any cost to herself. To be freed from the odium of debt nothing could, or should, be regarded in the light of a sacrifice. Poor girl! There was one to which, in her esteem, death itself had been a preferable alternative.

With the last act of the drama carefully dotted out in her fertile brain, Lady Graham had, immediately on quitting Eaton Place, summoned to a private conference her confidential man of business, a clever and not too scrupulous attorney. Not that her ladyship entertained the most distant idea of consulting this very clever and unscrupulous attorney with a view to

any material alteration of her plans, she simply laid her project before him, leaving to his superior technical skill the mode of carrying it into operation.

This project, cruel and uncalled for, was after this wise. Repudiating the sale of the Twickenham villa, affecting, indeed, to yield it up, a propitiatory atonement to the love-sick girl at the expense of justice, it was proposed to raise a loan on her patrimonial estate of La Garde—a step which, striking at the root of the prejudices of the proud and sensitive noble, would, she knew, more than almost any other, alienate him from his ward; but as this was the end aimed at, there was nothing further to be said.

A rough but most exaggerated summary of the liabilities, compiled by her ladyship, with an equally false estimate of the available resources—false, inasmuch as they were rated at less than a third of their value—nevertheless enabled the lynx-eyed attorney to perceive that those resources, turned to fair account, had more than sufficed to meet the said liabilities without detriment to the hereditary property; and why those resources were not to be rendered available even his penetration failed in the onset to discover, but in the onset only. Mr. Allen M'Leod had not been her ladyship's trusty and well-beloved counsellor, agent, &c., &c., from the

hour he drew up her marriage settlement, without having plumbed to the very depths of her cold scheming heart, even as his acuteness had calculated the keen intellect and unconquerable will that went along with it.

That some notable scheme was afloat in her ladyship's brain, only needing his technical skill to bring it to maturity, he nothing doubted ; and almost a match for the widow in subtlety, though he fell far short of her in daring, he did not despair of speedily extracting the kernel from the nut ; meanwhile he could afford to wait her ladyship's good pleasure ; he could better do without her, than she without him ; moreover, he was of a most exemplary patience, and having a wife and family mainly dependent upon the skilful conduct of his craft, was wide awake to the danger of precipitation.

True, a formidable difficulty presented itself, in the fact of the heir being under age, and the assent and signature of her guardian being requisite to make any arrangement valid ; difficulties, however, her ladyship had coped with before, and always surmounted, and *failure* was an unrecognized word with her, at all hazards she ignored it on the present occasion ; she had not climbed thus far up the steep and slippery ascent towards the goal of her ambition, to be turned back by a paper bullet. Already the

imperious "ôte toi que je m'y mettes !" hovered on her lips, and spoke in every arrogant gesture.

For the second time her factotum was announced, and this time the project laid bare before him. Not by word or gesture did he venture upon interruption till she paused with an expressive, "I have done ; it is only for you to draw up the instrument."

"Ah !" and strangely significant, and even ominous must that "*Ah*," of the lawyer have been, for it sufficed to draw every particle of blood from lip and cheek of her who heard it.

"The owner of this estate is then a minor ?"

"A minor ;—yes."

"The property in the hands of trustees ?"

"A trustee, Mr. M'Leod, who is also the lady's guardian."

"And this guardian is abroad ?"

"Abroad ;——but that is of no moment, his consent would not be asked, even if he were on the spot."

"*Exactly* ; then I have simply to acquaint your ladyship that nothing can be done in the matter. That rose-scented billet in your hand is not more valueless than would be any instrument I might draw up without the endorsement of the trustee to the property, and even then, as none have better reason to know than your ladyship," and the lawyer smiled half maliciously,

"over entailed property no one can exercise a shadow of control."

"Mr. M'Leod, you have not allowed yourself time for the due consideration of this matter."

"If I were to consider the matter till the 'crack of doom,' it were all one. I gave your ladyship credit for being a better lawyer. What! a loan advanced without security—preposterous! And the title-deeds—where are they?"

"Mr. M'Leod, I confess my inability to hand them over to you at the present moment."

"Precisely, madam; and if you could hand them over to me, and to all the law-courts in the kingdom, it would make no manner of difference, lacking the consent and signatures of the trustees and guardians to the property. But there are other modes of raising loans. Landed property is just the last thing to jeopardize;" and discarding all technical circumlocution, Mr. M'Leod proceeded to show how the exigencies of the case might be met, but each suggestion was briefly and imperiously negatived by his client.

"I thought I had already made it clear to you, Mr. M'Leod, that it was my will and pleasure that the required loan be levied on the family estate whether jeopardized or not."

"And a lady's will, madam, is allowed to be absolute; there are exceptional cases, however; this is one. Till your ladyship can show me the

dunderhead who will advance cash, hard cash, without other bond than the ipse dixit of a minor, I must decline to entertain the question."

If a look could have annihilated the expositor of the law, he had too surely been defunct—but her ladyship's wrath only betrayed to his keen perception the weakness of her cause.

"It is my belief, sir, that a mortgage on Mdlle. de Malcé's inheritance is perfectly practicable, and without risk to the mortgagee."

"Then I have only to regret your ladyship's lack of professional knowledge ; now, I have not a fraction of interest in the estate, the mortgage, or the mortgagee, but I own to a trifling modicum in my own behalf, and must with all possible respect for your ladyship, decline to endanger it."

"Then, sir, I must treat with some less scrupulous man of business."

The attorney bowed,—“No man of business, madam, would put his own or his client's neck in a noose, none but a fool would do it.”

“And the world, Mr. M'Leod, is full to repletion of the genus. No need to get sore-footed in your search after such kine.”

“But they never yet took the guise of a lawyer, madam,” he significantly returned.

“Enough, sir ; I will work without you.”

Once more the attorney bowed—worse still, he rose, and deliberately adjusted his gloves.

Her ladyship was foiled, and at her own weapons. This man who stood before her, so calm, and smiling, and self-possessed—this man had no scruples of his own, no fine-spun sensibilities to wound, no principles but the bald broad one of self-interest to corrupt : yet, there he stood as though he were an honest man, and had a right to look smiling and composed.

Full well her ladyship knew that he was in the right when he said “nothing could be done,” nothing legally was, of course, understood, or he had never said it at his own cost ; but what then ? was the profession of the law so immaculate of character that it presented no loophole of escape ?

Had he, that sleek cut man about to leave her with that half insolent insouciant air, nothing to propose, no suggestion to offer, no hint to throw out that might save the silken skin of her woman's delicacy ?

Among all the manifold quips and quirks, and windings and waverings, and subtleties of the law, was there not one by which that law might be evaded ?

The attorney made no sign, each finger of his pepper and salt cotton glove was fitted to a nicety, and he was going.



"You shall hear from me, Mr. M'Leod. Good morning."

And still with the same suave, self-satisfied, and half-jubilant smile, his attorneyship bowed himself from the lady's presence.

"Every man has his price," soliloquized the widow, as the door closed upon her heretofore obsequious man of business, "anyway a Scotch lawyer will hardly lag behind. Stolid and cautious, this man will run small risk—well, his retaining fee shall be a rich one, though beggary to me be its price; besides, he can hardly object to draw up a simple statement of the case, showing how A consents to advance a loan on B's estate, B agreeing for a certain fixed period of time to yield possession of the said estate. It can be so technically worded as to give it the colour of a legal document.

"Her signature affixed, at once makes her responsible for the act, and that suffices for my purpose. Only get over her qualms of conscience in tampering with her inheritance," she exultingly went on, "and the rest is easy sailing; the idiot would put her name to anything, sign her own death-warrant, peril her soul's salvation, if you only told her somebody would be benefited by it."

Ay, she would, Lady Graham; in the

feebleness or tenderness of her nature she would do all this, and herein "show herself more godlike than thy virtue is, whose span shuts out the wretched only."

"Oh, surely," continued her ladyship, "this document, the witness of her shame, with the heavier offence of her disloyalty (and I will so colour matters as to mould them to this shape), effectually destroys all chance of her wearing the Castleton coronet. Why it were a meritorious act to rid so illustrious a house of the simpleton."

Pending this notable arrangement of her ladyship's the "simpleton," alone and unaided, had performed an act which, morally and socially considered, might be termed a noble one.

Everything in her town-house, with the exception of the furniture of her cherished boudoir, and a couple of sleeping apartments for the occasional occupation of herself and Adèle, went to the hammer, and with an expedition that was in itself a merit.

With the large sum (fleeced as she naturally was in the sale) thus realized every claim on the estate had been met, had it answered the ends of Mdle. de Malcé's *friends* that it should do so; but it did not—more, much more, it was averred, was needed.

It was now therefore that the poor hunted girl resolved on making the final sacrifice. The villa should go! that lovely sylvan retreat! sacred alike to her lover and her friend; for had not Herbert besought her to make it her home? "No matter, it should go."

And now it was that her ladyship stepped in, and for the first time affecting sympathy with her distress, interfered to prevent that sacrifice.

When her clever ladyship conceived the idea of braving the strong arm of the law in the matter of Lord Castleton's signature to a deed which perilled La Garde, she forgot that a yet more insuperable obstacle might rise up to counteract her project in the opposing will of a weak girl; very, *very* weak in having fallen so easy a prey to the snares laid for her, but strong in the instincts of a most loving and honourable nature.

How traffic then with that warm, loving nature; how tamper with those bright instincts?

It was, indeed, under another and harsher form that her ladyship again and again shaped this, to her, momentous question, and each time with less and less assurance of success as to the issue.

Everything—her town-house with its glorious appointments, her equipage and servants, all had been eagerly surrendered; even her heart's

golden treasury, the love-gift of her betrothed, she was struggling for courage to offer up an atonement for her follies: but this—this, her childhood's home! the time-honoured possession of her race! Oh, that was a sacred thing from which she could not and would not divorce herself!

Even the proposer of this wanton outrage, strong in her own ancestral pride, could regard it in no other light than an outrage, and pondered and schemed to bring about its suggestion by insidious means; for apart from the necessity of appearing in Lord Castleton's eyes ignorant of the transaction, for once even her audacity had failed her in making a direct personal proposal on the subject. All the onerous part of the business, however, was to be shuffled on to the shoulders of the now obsequious lawyer, to be raised for the nonce into a special pleader.

Yes, once again they were sailing in calm water, the plotter and her agent. He had suffered the ruffled plums of his dignity to be smoothed down by her *patte de velours*, that same velvet *patte* holding within its clasp an unanswerable argument, the worth of a royal ransom. And little enough to do for it beyond lying bravely to a simple girl, as ignorant of law-terms as of Egyptian hieroglyphics, a matter this to settle privately with his own conscience.

Her ladyship's amended bill involved little personal risk—the reward had cancelled a score such.

Having then calculated to a minimum the profit and loss in the business, the last indeed being nil, Mr. M'Leod decided to stand by his old client, serving her to the utmost limits of the law, but not one tittle of an inch beyond.

Most disinterested of attorneys! If the scale had turned by the value of a single fraction, nay, "but in the estimation of a hair," as Portia has it, on the opposing side he had dropped the charlatan and played the honester game. "As a rule," he was wont to say, "he gave honesty the preference;" perhaps he did when policy marched hand in hand with it; on this occasion it took an opposite direction, and the well-trained steps of the attorney quite naturally followed in the wake.

Perhaps the reader will be at no loss to point to the author of the following anonymous communication received by Florence the day after an interview with her ladyship:—

"One who is deeply interested in Mdlle. de Malcé's welfare, takes the liberty of suggesting to her a mode of release from her present most painful embarrassments, a mode which involving no shadow of dishonour, will promptly and effectually enable her to escape the obloquy

attendant upon a public sale of her villa residence at Twickenham.

"The mode proposed is by a mortgage on the patrimony of La Garde. Without detriment to Mdle. de Malcé's title to that hereditary estate such an amount may be raised, no one being cognizant of the same but the immediate agents in the treaty, as shall forthwith free her from all present liabilities.

"Should Mdle. de Malcé incline to this proposal, a letter addressed to 'Delta,' — Hotel, Charing Cross, will meet immediate and respectful attention."

And who was "Delta?" A myth like Sarah Gamp's bosom friend, Mrs. Harris? No matter, it served the purpose for which it stood something better than that intangible personage—it half broke the heart of her who received "Delta's" suggestion, at all events. To convey an adequate idea of the shock produced by it were simply impossible.

True, Lord Castleton's gift, on which the fond solicitude of the lover had lavished such a rich argosy of treasure, was thereby saved—but, oh! the immensity of the sacrifice at which it was proposed to purchase that safety!

Till now the bolt could not be said to have fallen with its full measure of weight; till now, though borne down by sorrow and a crushing

sense of humiliation, shame and guilt had had no portion in it. Henceforth the taint of sin was on her.

"And has it come to this! to this!" she exclaimed as an agonized cry escaped her bursting heart. "My own dear home! where I nestled to my father's bosom! where I wandered with *him* to whom that father's love bequeathed me! No, I will perish first!"

But *she* stood there, the temptress, sublime in her veiled hypocrisy! and heard this avowal; and though no word of hers would seem to favour this suggestion of "Delta," she so contrived to magnify and garble the dangers of the case, that release without assent to this proposed step appeared little less than an impossibility.

"At any and all hazards, the villa must be saved from the desecration of the hammer," said her ladyship. "What, *his* gift! his birthday gift too, was it not? why it were an outrage on common feeling, on common delicacy!"

"Yes, yes! it is dreadful! dreadful! Ah, Stratford! why, why did you leave me to my own weak and guilty devices?"

"Nay, Mdlle. de Malcé, compose yourself, I beg;" her ladyship's tone was soft and soothing. "This love-gage must not be put in peril, must not be knocked down to some cockney cheesemonger, at a tithe part of its value too; in com-

mon delicacy it must not, shall not. Men are strangely jealous where their honour or their affections are concerned ; they do not argue as we do ; if we reason at all, we reason from the heart, they from the head, unequal combatants ever. Now Lord Castleton himself, almost alone in his exemption from all ordinary frailty, is, and always has been, the sternest of judges. Does it need a Cassandra to predict what his verdict will be here ? An estate purchased for his betrothed bride, sold by public auction to the highest bidder, for the discharge of a heavy gambling debt to the most notorious roué of the day—monstrous ! why it were an insult to the plebeian blood of the meanest trader ; how then of that which crimsones the veins of the haughty Earl of Castleton ? ”

A stifled moan made an instant's pause, and her ladyship mildly resumed. “ Let me see—‘Delta’—who *can* he be ? He speaks, if I am not mistaken, of the secrecy with which this matter may be conducted,” and she glanced furtively over the edge of the paper at her shrinking victim, whom she was enmeshing after the fashion of the spider and the fly. “ Yes—‘no one being cognizant of the same’ are his words ; while the other, alas ! embraces all the odium—the shame, and disgrace of a public exposure. A dreadful alternative it cannot be denied,



and one which I tremble to think involves the almost inevitable rejection on his lordship's part of an alliance with you."

Another anguished moan from the heart she was, with such diabolical skill, such refined and hellish cruelty, ensnaring to inexorable doom, warned her that for the present she must desist. Why, indeed, go on with the rack and the screw? They had done their work bravely.

It were a tedious as well as a painful task to follow up the train of arguments, ingenious as subtle, and no less infamous than subtle, by which, one by one, the servile attorney bore down the resolves of the spirit-broken girl, ultimately sweeping away the last frail remnant of hope to which she had heretofore clung.

She was shown in hard figures that the proceeds of the sale of her country residence would be inadequate to the liquidation of her debts—that place on which the princely spirit of Lord Castleton had expended a fortune! What did this child-woman know of hard-cash in hard figures, any more than the child-wife of David Copperfield? She believed in them, believed in her betrayers—and—was undone.

Garbled statements, grossly exaggerated calculations, together with threatening consequences as the ultimatum of her refusal to embrace

the proposed measure, left her apparently without an alternative.

“Alas ! the strait of her who owns that best  
Which last she'd wish were done !”

Even after her slow assent had been wrung from her, it was retracted—“Anything but that !” was wildly prayed for, “any punishment, so that the old ancestral hearth might yet be left to her.”

Bootless petition ! nothing less than that had sufficed to taint her name.

As the pen that signed away present possession of her birthright fell from the nerveless fingers of the betrayed and outraged girl, she fell a cold dead weight to the floor. The overstrained bow snapped in twain, as the bleeding heart sent forth its last feeble cry of insufferable agony.

And the night that followed the consummation of this cruel and unjustifiable act ! Why, ages of agony were engulfed in it—a century of thought—thought that might well have driven a young blithe spirit mad—alone with her wild grief—her inextinguishable shame. Prostrate at the base of her father's picture Florence de Malcé knelt—knelt there till her brain reeled, for to her bewildered imagination those benignant eyes no longer wore the same tender ex-

pression, but had changed to the glare of a fiend. With hands clutched tightly over her eyes, she tried to shut out the frightful vision—in vain—she saw it still, it burnt into her heart's core.

The next day a silken curtain veiled the picture. That curtain was never raised till the night of Lord Castleton's return.

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## CHAPTER X.

And all beneath her influence droop or die.

BYRON.

ON leaving Eaton Place her ladyship condescendingly offered to set down Mr. M'Leod at his house in Hanover Street.

They were opposite each other in the snug little brougham.

That her ladyship was a cool hand became the undoubted conviction of his attorneyship, as he watched that perjured traitress fold and refold the agreement just signed by her dupe.

"And this precious piece of mummery, madam, purchased at the price of so many lies from—from me—so many blood-distilled sighs and groans from the poor lassie—what is its worth?"

"A countess's coronet to me," was the exultant *thought* of her ladyship. "Well, you lately appraised it at the value of a rose-scented billet,

I think, Mr. M'Leod," was the insolent rejoinder.

"Yes, you *are* an unco cool hand, my lady, and no manner of mistake.—Just so, madam, and I do not presume to ask what you propose to yourself by this—this—by the Lord, madam, 'Old Nick' himself could call it nothing but a rascally transaction—I say I do not ask what your ladyship proposes to yourself by it—that is your affair—not mine."

"Precisely so, Mr. M'Leod; your instincts are acute as unerring, they have enabled you accurately to discriminate between the meum and tuum—my business and your own. By your good leave we will let the matter so rest."

No, the lawyer's plain sense was no match against the fine irony of the arch dissembler, shrewd and cannie though he was.

"Very good, madam! very good! but since 'Delta,' whose classical cognomen I have for the nonce assumed, is a creation of your ladyship's brain, a phantom, in short, may I venture to ask who is the *bonâ fide* flesh and blood Rothschild who is to furnish the supplies for my client's debts?"

Her ladyship shrugged her shoulders. "To own the truth, Mr. M'Leod, without evasion of your very thoughtful question, I almost fancy there are but few remaining—debts I mean."

"Very few, I should say—does it not strike your ladyship, always assuming this simple child's factotum or steward, who it appeared had the sole conduct of the sale, to be honest, that there must be a surplus in hand in lieu of debts?"

"You forget Mdlle. de Malcé's gambling debt."

"Your pardon, madam, I do not. The poor bairn expressly stated that her debts of honour were provided for; she urged it, indeed, emphatically as a reason, a weighty one, too, why her estate should remain intact."

"Quite true, Mr. M'Leod,—what a memory you have! Hanover Street, I believe; shall I trouble you to touch the check-string? Au plaisir, Mr. M'Leod."

And thus, with feelings of mutual distrust, and consequent dislike, the two parted.

Even this cold arid lawyer could afford a modicum of compassion for the "poor lassie," though he had not been proof against a bribe to lend a helping hand in speeding her downfall.

Familiarity with the face of crime is very apt to make an expert criminal—practice in the art of breaking open Mdlle. de Malcé's despatches, secreted by her hireling, Mrs. Stewart, and forwarded under cover to Brook Street, soon nul-

lified all scruples of conscience in the matter on the part of her ladyship. Nothing embarrassed therefore, she one morning took from the hall-table in Eaton Place a letter addressed to the mistress of the mansion, and speedily possessed herself of its contents.

It was from Messrs. Fenton, the bankers, and conveyed the information, couched in terms of the most respectful courtesy, that all cheques bearing Mdlle. de Malcé's signature, would henceforth be duly honoured.

That such information would ere long be forwarded to Mdlle. de Malcé, her ladyship never for a moment doubted, knowing so well the careless munificence of Lord Castleton, but it was of the utmost consequence that it should be kept secret from her charge ; with unlimited funds once again at her command the schemer's power over the whilom spendthrift would, to a great extent, be null and void.

Well, well ; anyway, did she not hold the evidence of her guilt (for such Lord Castleton would esteem it) in yonder paper ? and that paper she resolved should, without further delay, be sent for his special edification.

And what, it may be asked, during this period of anxiety to her lady, has become of Mrs. Stewart, that she has ceased to play her part of spy over her every thought and action ?—

playing that part with a heavy, sorrow-laden spirit, it is true, yet powerless to assert herself and shake off the chain of serfdom.

"And this is my work!" burst from the conscience-stricken woman, when matters reached their culmination. From that hour she sensibly drooped, finally succumbed altogether, refusing even to leave her room.

Every gentle womanly attention that the loving nature of Florence dictated was lavished on her. In vain! From Florence more especially she shrunk with that shuddering recoil which had before so wounded her. At last it was whispered that her mind was wandering, and now Lady Graham, watching her with the vigilance of a cat over a miserable mouse, promptly came to the rescue, affirming that the air of Brook Street was more likely to agree with an invalid than the more relaxing one of Belgravia, and in despite of all remonstrance had her forthwith removed thither.

And none lamented the sad and silent woman, with her cold Puritan creed, and cold Puritan manners; none but Florence, and whom would she not have missed, whom not loved and lamented?

Mr. M'Leod had not erred when he said that the "poor bairn" was provided with the means of discharging her obligations to the baronet.

Twice had Florence, through her faithful Adèle, attempted the settlement, and twice had she been foiled.

On the first occasion of her seeking Sir Harcourt he was from home; on the second, the amount of the debt was re-enclosed, accompanied by a note praying permission to be allowed the honour of an interview, on the plea of its being absolutely incumbent on him to enter into an explanation with Mdlle. de Malcé on the matter in question.

But Florence, though more than ever eager for the arrangement of this affair, was denied to all visitors; moreover, she now confined herself almost entirely to the retirement of her Twickenham residence. Except on matters of business she never re-visited the scene of her former splendour.

In this resolve she was encouraged by her ladyship; it favoured her scheme for the prevention of a meeting between the lovers.

Lord Castleton, whose return might now be almost daily expected (the departure of the embassy at St. Petersburg having, indeed, been officially announced for the 25th of the month), would, she conjectured, seek his ward in town, and, missing her there, proceed at once to Brook Street. And then!—ay, then!



Well, it would be hard if her woman's wit should be at so low a mark that she could not checkmate this baby-girl, and fling a cloud of dust in the eyes of the frank and unsuspecting noble.

And there was nothing to a mind so viciously constructed as that of the Lady Graham that was without the pale of possibility, or even probability, in this scheme.

It is precisely such natures as those of which the Earl of Castleton's was a type that are most readily snared to their destruction. Why it was the open, generous, and unsuspicious nature of the noble Moor that made him the easy dupe of the serpent Iago, whom he took to be of such "exceeding honesty."

To ask why Stratford Castleton, with his commanding intellect and keen sense of honour, could be overmastered by the thing which, *known*, he had spurned from his path as too loathsome to crush, involves no very deep or subtle question.

"Insects have made the lion mad ere now."

With one single spark of levity discernible in her bearing, this woman had been powerless, utterly powerless. Her rigid virtue was the magic wand that made men her dupes.

The sudden passion on the part of Florence

for retirement, favoured the schemes of the clever tactician, nor was it without its advantage to the penitent herself, who mourned incessantly her past follies, and formed sage resolves for the future, evermore praying for her guardian's return, the while trembling at the thought of meeting him.

She saw no one, shrunk abashed at the idea ; and yet she languished in this unnatural state. Over the sweet, musical mirthfulness of a nature such as hers, solitude operated like a nightmare. Florence de Malcé was formed for sunshine, not the shade, for smiles and softest endearments.

In this instance seclusion, it is true, was her choice ; she need not have been alone in her retreat. The world, no doubt, is a very selfish world, a censorious one too ; yet in the aggregate, the larger proportion will be found to be immeasurably in favour of the kind-hearted and true.

Whether it was that this same world was in an especially placable mood, or that the light, Elysian spirit and unassuming demeanour of this young girl had left a hoard of sweet and sunny memories behind, certain it was that in all but the "Graham" circle, her name was handled with a strange loving gentleness and charity.

Not a few drove down to Twickenham, stimulated by other than idle curiosity. It was the genuine expression of a grateful emotion that prompted the wide-away-from-respectable Mrs. Hamilton to make a second and third attempt to see her who, in her palmy day, had lavished thousands upon her.

Happy had it been for the ruined heiress if nothing more valuable than gold and gems had been wasted; but, alas! that which no gold could buy, even her own spotless reputation, had been lent to prop up many a one fallen into decadence. The guilt-stained are glad to trade on virtue, though they possess none.

Yes, our poor penitent was sincere in her resolve to shun all intercourse with the world. Twice had Sir Harcourt turned from the gates disappointed in the sanguine hope of an interview with her. To the Beringfords, indeed, she had gladly given audience, but they had accompanied the bride, and were knocking about the Mediterranean. Constance, too, was away at Baden, whither she had been lured in the hope of bringing back the health that had fled for ever, to her kinswoman, Mrs. Morley; but to her Florence had written, and not long she knew would that dear friend retard her return when once sensible of the sea of difficulties into which her imprudence had plunged her,—yes,

that was the thorn that pierced her so acutely, her own imprudence,—and worse than imprudence ! oh, far worse !

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## CHAPTER XI.

There are souls  
To whom dishonour's shadow is a substance  
More terrible than death here and hereafter ;  
Men who, though proof against all blandishments  
Of pleasure, and all pangs of pain, are feeble  
When the proud name on which they pinnacled  
Their hopes is breath'd on.

MARINO FALIERO.

THE time had at length arrived when her ladyship deemed it expedient to rouse the man she loved from his dream of blissful security.

His lordship is announced to quit St. Petersburg on the 25th, and but a fortnight of that period remains. Well, it will suffice for her purpose.

Oh ! well did that bold, bad woman know the proud and sensitive but most generous nature she had to deal with ! She knew, too, far too well for her own peace, that Florence de Malcé was enshrined in his heart as a being of holiness.

How then disabuse him of this all-powerful

love and trust, or how, succeeding even beyond her most daring hopes, with Lord Castleton's wealth of honour, bring him to break faith with a solemnly affianced wife? "How?" Why, through that very honour, that very sensitiveness to all that militated against it. Yes; she did, alas! know the plague-spot in the otherwise almost faultless nature of the Earl of Castleton.

Could she but strike him through his pride—oh! not the pride of birth, of wealth or station,—but the pride that held itself aloof from the faintest shadow of dishonour. Could she but succeed in affixing the brand of infamy upon her he loved, she knew that, though his heart-strings burst in the struggle, he would tear her from that heart, ay, even though she had been pressed to his bosom as his wedded wife.

Her ladyship had been far too wise to attempt to gain her ends by any of the ordinary measures not unfrequently resorted to, to close a lover's heart against the cherished one. Apart from the difficulty, nay, the impossibility, in this instance of intercepting their correspondence, or the absurdity of penning anonymous letters to his lordship, she was wide awake to the fact that any lapse in the first would be scrupulously investigated, and the last consigned to the flames ere well read, for jealously sensitive as was Lord

Castleton in all and everything that never so remotely touched the fair fame of his betrothed, he was of far too lofty and frank a nature to stoop his ear to a nameless slander.

No ; there was but one course open to her ladyship, to make a simple, direct, and to all appearance, honest statement of the truth.

With this accomplished schemer, there was, after her resolve was taken, no turning or shadow of turning. Her active brain conceived, her iron soul confirmed her purpose.

There was triumph in her eye, but no pallor on cheek, or brow, or lip. No tremor of the small fair hand as she unlocked her desk, and prepared to stain the spotless paper with the audacious lie. As though perjury were a crime familiar in her philosophy she paused not a single second when the pen was in her hand, and a letter, enclosing the memorandum that signed away the inheritance, the unfortunate girl's own signature affixed, was by that night's mail despatched to the Earl of Castleton.

His lordship meanwhile in his foreign home, a prey to anxiety, counts the weary hours of his weary banishment. His last three letters to his ward are unnoticed. Cruel fears have taken possession of his mind. "Is she ill? his treasured love! Does she—oh harrowing thought!—love him less fervently than when they parted?"

There had been, or had he fancied it? a restraint in her later communications. They had been brief, oh so brief! And surely, oh surely, they lacked that soul-breathing warmth, that gushing tenderness that had been wont to characterize every line from that beloved hand! There had been no soft murmurs that she saw him not, no chiding his delay, not a hope breathed for his return.

Castleton saw, and felt all this acutely, but, with a lover's sophistry sought to excuse what he could not account for. When did true affection shadow forth a thought that wronged the beloved one? but he grew daily, hourly, more uneasy, more restless, and more impatient of the impediments to his return home; impediments now happily cleared away, for his departure was fixed within the week.

But the morrow comes, and goes, and still no line from his heart's idol.

Another morrow dawns, and dies. At last; oh, excess of joy! the long-coveted treasure is in his trembling hand.

Why does Lord Castleton hesitate to open love's missive? what foreboding stays the breaking of that brittle wax? and why do the pulses of his heart come to a dead stop; the lip breathe forth a gasping prayer that "all may be well?"

And when it is opened; what spell, what

wondrous spell lies within its folds? Already it has chased the ashen hue from lip and cheek, and flooded the so lately mournful eyes in tears of ecstasy.

Yet brief indeed must needs be its contents; an embassy from Queen Mab had scarcely presented more fairy-like proportions than did that tiny billet-doux—yet, well has it performed its mission. How many times was it pressed to the heart and to the lips of Castleton.

Again, and yet again, he pored over its concluding lines. "And when we meet, ah, Stratford! how much you will have to forgive your erring Florence. Can you ever forgive her? I ask my trembling heart this question a hundred times a day, and mournfully whispers back that heart—'Never!' But then comes the dear memory of all your tenderness, all your forbearance, and I hope against hope. Oh that you had never left me! I was safe only under your protecting love. When will this weary exile end? Oh when!"

"Even now! this day, this hour! my life! my love! my idol! This tedious business of leave-taking over, what can, what shall detain me beyond to-morrow? Yes, to-morrow ends my exile; to this I pledge myself, my own love."

And Castleton looked and spoke as though he were really addressing his ward. "What ten-



derness, what trust, what melting softness breathes through every line of her letter! Oh dearly! dearly will I requite thee, thou best beloved!

"Forgive thee! my precious, peerless one! rather let me ask pardon of thee for this cruel separation. Why, indeed, did I ever leave thee? What had I to do with ambition? why have I thrust myself into the arena of political strife?

"But I will think of nothing but our reunion. Thank Heaven, all that etiquette exacts is over, and to-morrow sees me on my way to love and happiness."

And Lord Castleton threw himself on the couch to indulge in the most delightful reverie that ever steeped a lover's senses in Elysium.

A packet of letters from England, one a voluminous despatch from Downing Street, lay unopened, and unopened it seemed destined to remain for some time, at least. Certainly, a full hour had elapsed, when listlessly turning them over, his eye fell upon one bearing the well-known superscription of Lady Graham.

With more apathy than he usually evinced, in the matter of a communication from this lady, associated as she was with his darling, he broke the seal of this.

Alas! must we go on? Must we lift the

veil, and show the tortured soul of the betrayed lover after the perusal of that perjured scroll?

The statuary of old were wont to conceal the features of the sufferer, under the influence of strong mental anguish, and herein was shown much wisdom. Human agony, in its most appalling aspect may, indeed, be conceived, but can rarely be depicted.

With one wild bound the heart of the devoted Castleton leaped from the height of bliss down to the deepest sink of misery.

Ay, Lord Castleton! Read!—note well the cool, the damning insult of each line!

The letter of Lady Graham ran as follows:—

“Hasten home, I beseech you, my lord. Forgive my abruptness in favour of my sincerity; I feel too much to study forms, and I dare no longer withhold the terrible truth.

“Rumour,—(would it were only rumour!)—is busy with the fair fame of her you loved. The most profligate of *your* sex, the most shunned of *ours* are, and have long been, the daily associates of your ward.

“It is now many weeks since, eluding my utmost vigilance, she left the opera-house in company with this dissolute man, passing several hours of the night alone with him; need I say I refer to Sir Harcourt Neville?

“This matter gave rise to much scandal at the

time ; a greater degree of caution has since been exercised, but their intimacy is still the current topic of the town.

"The gaming-table is Mdle. de Malcé's nightly resort, her gambling debt to Sir Harcourt is considerable. Creditors grow clamorous, La Garde is heavily mortgaged, or had been, but that I stepped in to avert the impending disgrace.

"Abandoned by the good and virtuous, it is now more than ever that the strong arm of your protection is needed, for, true to its creed, though the world can spare abundance of pity for you——"

"Pity !" Oh, most wily of your sex ! that word was aptly conceived. How must the proud soul of Lord Castleton shrink at the bare thought of pity ! Pity, too, for such a wrong—the deepest, the deadliest, man can suffer.

"Though the world," the letter went on, "can spare abundance of pity for you, it has, alas ! nothing but scorn and contumely for the poor victim. Even I, for my child's sake, dare no longer avow myself the friend of one so fallen.

"Hasten home, then, dear Lord Castleton, for though your ward has forfeited all claim to a dearer title, yet, as her guardian, you will counsel what may best be done in this deplorable affair.

"I grieve over your unmerited wrongs, yet, like the world I condemn, have, alas, nothing

but commiseration to offer, and that a mind like yours would not deign to accept.

"I know not how the report of your engagement has of late become so popular a theme among our aristocratic circles, but so it is ; bets, I am told, are pending the course you will adopt in reference to this unhappy girl.

"How little they know the Earl of Castleton who can speculate upon the bare possibility of his sullyng his haughty escutcheon by an alliance with one so lost. Yet am I very sure that he will do all that honour, all that exalted goodness and compassion may permit, and Sir Harcourt, though no marrying man, may be won over to an act of—shall I say justice ? God bless you prays

"Your sorrowing friend,

"MARGARET GRAHAM."

In less time than it has taken to transcribe it was this monstrous perversion of truth penned. It is laid before our readers fresh from the Jesuit soul that coined it. The "God bless you," with which it ended, was an anti-climax. That the woman lived who could, in cold blood, shape words so hideous that, in blasting the reputation of one human being, they must plunge yet another into an eternity of woe, and in the same breath invoke the name of the Almighty

to bless that other, had in it something too fearful, too terrible for the human mind to contemplate. A Lucretia Borgia alone had been equal to it.

And did Lord Castleton yield credence to this pyramid of slander? Startled out of his Elysian dream of security by a tale so monstrous, did he, for even the brief space of a single moment, believe in it?

Well, there was enough in that serpent scroll and its enclosure (the agreement to the loan on La Garde, with its fatal signature), to throw the strongest mind off its balance. It was not immediately that his alarmed senses drank in its contents in all their dread significance; but if he wavered in his belief of the apostasy of his betrothed it was not possible to doubt it altogether.

Alas! the mode of telling the tale was too plausible—the lie, however audacious, too seeming true—the circumstances too skilfully knit together. Shaking off by the force of an iron will, the death-like torpor creeping over him, he strove to weigh each separate line of the dread epistle, and as he thus, inch by inch, imbibed its deadly poison, every drop of blood in his veins seemed scorching to furnace heat.

Slowly, and one by one, he syllabled those hideous words (oh, God! what fiend had shaped

them) "*Sir Harcourt may be won to an act of justice.*" He strove to speak, but utterance was suspended—to move, but the power had fled.

Was he going mad, or was he under the influence of some hellish delusion—some nightmare of the mind? His brain seemed charged with liquid fire—the heat of the room stifled him—alas! it was but the suffocating sense of the horror within.

Rallying for an instant, he staggered into the open air. It brought no relief—the pure blue vault of heaven had turned to a sea of blood. The solid earth rocked beneath his feet, and reeling, fainting, he sank a dead weight to the ground.

In what do these vile traducers differ from the assassin? In nothing, save, perhaps, in their absolute lack of animal courage to handle the dagger and to see blood flow. The assassin of virtue is only more treacherous, not less deadly than the destroyer of life—nor are the sometime consequences less disastrous. Tears shed over the bier of the virtuous are sanctified, but reason mocks at those which water the grave of the dishonoured.

Not long lasted that friendly insensibility, but with restored consciousness came back the recollection of her ladyship's letter; Castleton

searched his pocket for it, and in doing so, drew forth in its stead, that of her innocent rival.

The dark frown scarcely relaxed as he scanned its contents, but the powerful mind, the critical judgment of the man partially recovered their balance.

"Can falsehood pen such words as these?" he asked. "Is this the language of a wanton?—a wanton! Almighty Heaven prove that word a lie, or annihilate existence in this hour!"

"Is this woman mad, or foully abused? It cannot be; oh, God, it *cannot* be! Florence de Malcé! *my affianced wife!*—so young—ere-while so innocent—and turn to shame! Impossible! *impossible!* Blistered be my tongue that could couple shame with her name!"

And as if seeking to strengthen the reviving impression of her purity, Lord Castleton drew from his bosom her miniature, which he wore night and day. It was the first time he had ever looked upon it without a flood of tender joy, and even now the sight of it gave confidence to his doubting heart, and a tide of generous emotions enlisted themselves in her behalf.

Its look of spotless innocence gave the lie to the odious slander, and appealed to the judgment of the man, no less than the tenderness of the lover.

The truth that beamed from out those violet

eyes, the deep of love and trust they revealed ; —and then the mouth, the cherub mouth, with its bewildering smile ; why that smile had defied a host of base detractors !

As the sight of the “gentle lady wedded to the Moor” sufficed to revive his faith in her loyalty, so did that smile exorcise, for a time at least, the doubts of Lord Castleton, and it was nearly in the words of the noble Moor that he apostrophized the inanimate ivory.

“If she be false, oh, then, Heaven mocks itself!—I’ll not believe it !

“Either this letter is a forgery, or Lady Graham raves. *I will not* be made the dupe of so foul a cheat.”

And now for a while Hope was stronger than Despair. Still the poison had been imbibed, and conviction, positive conviction of the innocence of her he loved, could alone calm the volcano smouldering in the breast of the deceived noble.



## CHAPTER XII.

If thou doth slander her, and torture me  
Never pray more.

OTHELLO.

\* \* \* \* \*

O, insupportable ! O, heavy hour !

OTHELLO.

At noon next day the Earl of Castleton left St. Petersburg. Those who saw him stagger to his carriage marvelled much what kind of grief that could be whose potency had in a few short hours wrought so fearful a change in the strong man. "The features," they said, "were not the features of a living man."

Ah, sorrow can plough deep channels in the brow of youth, even in a single night ! in a single night the raven hair may become blanchèd as snow, the stalwart frame wax feeble as a little child's. God and his own heart alone knew the crushing weight of woe that, during that homeward bound journey, well-nigh brought the proud Earl of Castleton to the grave. Again and again, as though it were gifted with magnetic attraction, he would return to the communication of Lady Graham, return to it long after its damning characters had burnt themselves into his brain ; and hers — his whilom love's — that letter which straight from

her bleeding heart breathed in its every line such tender yet deep contrition, now to his racked imagination assumed another and strangely ominous signification. That letter itself appeared in judgment against her—"Can you ever forgive your erring Florence?" Yes, she stood condemned by her own ingenuous confession of wrong and her omission of the nature of that wrong; for what offence was it she could commit, and he not pardon, save that one alone which her pen dare not trace?

To his lordship's exalted opinion of Lady Graham, together with the absence of all motive for the defamation of his ward, must be ascribed the wavering credence yielded to her representations. Coming from almost any other person in the world, the slander had been flung back in the teeth of the slanderer.

Unfortunately the rumours that greeted his ears on reaching the English shores, instead of quelling his doubts, gave a strong colour of truth to a portion at least of them.

That his ward had for months past pursued an unbroken career of reckless folly was the mildest judgment pronounced upon her. And how much was there in all this to sadden the lover and humiliate the man; yet all this had been frankly, freely forgiven.

Thankfully, joyfully, had the generous Castle-

ton saddled himself with the whole weight of blame in this matter, making his own weak indulgence the root of the evils accruing from it.

No, all this were but as chaff before the wind weighed against the grosser offence so unshrinkingly referred to by Lady Graham, who of all others, as he with a sinking heart confessed, must, as guardian of his ward's conduct, be best qualified to determine its truth or falsehood.

On reaching Eaton Place, the door was opened to his lordship by a strange porter, but he made no inquiry, and he was half way up the staircase before he comprehended that Mdlle. de Malcé was not only not at home but that it was uncertain when she would be.

Wound up to the extremest point of human endurance a passive state was simply impossible, and thus, with every feeling in revolt against her ladyship, as the denunciator of his ward, he yet decided upon that course the most fatal of all others in the case of the unfortunate girl—he drove to Brook Street.

Need it be said that Lady Graham was prepared to receive his lordship, to receive him with a soft and solemn tenderness befitting his great grief, and her huge sympathy with that grief. Absorbed, however, in the one dread question of the faith or the apostasy of the woman he so

idolatrously loved, all sympathy was lost upon him.

Her ladyship was the first to speak, to assure him of her sense of his sorrow, but with a distracted air he interrupted her, and made a movement as though he would have cast himself at her feet.

"Oh, Lady Graham! tell me this hideous tale is false, that it was some strange misconception. I conjure you speak—tell me at least that some remnant of hope is left to save me from utter madness."

In a voice that seemed to issue from the profoundest depths of a bleeding heart had these words come forth—but the lady flinched not. No sigh of remorse, no throb of pity for either victim was awakened. Maddened, in fact, by the manifestation of a love so omniscient as well-nigh to threaten the overthrow of reason, her resolve was strengthened to consummate the work so savagely begun.

The destiny of Florence de Malcé whom she hated with a supremacy of hate that raised even her own wonder, hung upon her fiat.

The words to which she should now give utterance would proclaim her guilt or innocence, and make or for ever destroy her in the esteem of him whose hand and coronet were the great stakes for which she played her desperate game.

She wavered not an instant in her purpose, but she turned away, as reluctant to pronounce her doom, with a heavy but suppressed sigh.

"Hear me, Lady Graham," exclaimed Lord Castleton sternly; "I ask no mercy at your hands, I have come here for the truth. Nor silence nor evasion will avail one jot; I will receive nothing on implication; I will condemn on no vague fantastic suspicion; I must have proof—do you heed me?—proof."

"Lord Castleton! Stratford! Oh, from my inmost soul I compassionate you!"

A smile of biting mockery writhed the blanched and quivering lip of his lordship, and a lightning glance flashed upon her from out those haughty eyes. That look had scathed, had scorched, a brow less bold than hers.

"Think you, madam, I have come hither to listen to the whinings of compassion? Yet once again I warn you I will take nothing on inference; I but demand from you the naked, undisguised truth. Is Florence de Malcé, my betrothed wife, the spotless being I once believed her, or is she—oh, God! am I to go forth a branded, broken-hearted man?"

"Talk not thus, Castleton, in mercy!"

Her companion stamped his foot madly. Lady Graham saw that affected reserve would not avail her, no sickly veil of sensibility simu-

lating pity would weigh a feather's weight with her stern auditor.

"Dear and most estimable friend," she began in a voice to which her deep love lent a pathos not its own, "I dare no longer trifle with your misery, nor stand before you in the light of a deceiver; I fear, I think—alas, why do I yet hesitate to avow the mournful truth?—Florence de Malcé is no longer worthy of your love, your respect! *she can never be the wife of Lord Castleton!*"

Heavily his lordship drew in his breath, then bent his head to hers as in a low but audible voice he asked, "Is it true that she passed some hours of the night in company with this man?"

"Alas, Stratford, but too true!"

Neither sigh nor groan escaped from the overcharged heart of the Earl of Castleton as doom was thus pronounced. His head declined upon his chest, only his deep breathing giving token that he lived.

In real alarm her ladyship drew near, but he saw her not. Very gently she laid her hand on his arm; this roused him; he shook it off as though it were the torpedo's touch.

"It suffices, madam; you have pronounced upon her infamy—and from you I have nothing more to hear, but from her own lips alone shall she stand condemned. I will *know* her for the

guilty thing you say she is. I will know my affianced bride can never be mine before I cast her from me for ever. Look to it, Lady Graham, if she is abused. O God! if you have abused my love!"

Lord Castleton paused, and for a moment even her bold eye quailed before the tempest of his wrath.

"If you have wronged her, not fiercest torments——"

"Hold, Lord Castleton! What is it you would say—what threaten?"

But Lord Castleton was gone.

And she stood there a guilty and half-despairing woman; for, oh, how wildly was this girl still worshipped! The very tumult she had but now witnessed only the more palpably betrayed the depth and tenderness of his devotion. How, then, subjugate a heart thus powerfully enthralled?

An interview between the pair was what she had most to dread, and that she was powerless to prevent; yet, even in the event of that interview, how little of all she had said and written could be disproved; and the stern and passionate nature of his lordship was ill adapted to temporize in a matter involving his honour. He was the last man on earth to brook stain upon that. This wretched girl *had* been the frequent compan-

ion of the too notorious baronet; she *had* left the opera house alone at the dead of the night with him; she *was* his debtor to a considerable amount;—all this was beyond contradiction.

“Yes, Florence de Malcé, once convinced you have played the wanton (and your own folly, your own sickly simplicity, will help him to this conviction), and your sway is at an end. Then what further barrier impedes, or even delays, the accomplishment of my own hopes?”

But even in the breathing of these sanguine aspirations, the flush of hope half died out. “What further barrier?” Even that which might never be surmounted—the indifference towards her of the object of her lawless idolatry. And with an internal shudder she recalled the look of loathing cast upon her as his lordship quitted the room.

“Oh, Castleton!” she exclaimed, in the ecstasy of jealous rage, yet with a softness in the utterance of that name, which that, and that alone, could call forth, “what would I not resign to win but one thousandth part of the love which, in spite of every accredited infamy, you still retain for this infatuated girl!”

The reflection in an opposite mirror of a form of almost faultless proportions re-awakened hopes that were certainly less exultant than they had been before her meeting with his lordship.



And Lady Graham breathed a prayer—ay, even so, a prayer from lips like hers!—to a pure God for the success of her demoniacal schemes.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

*Tout est perdu, hors l'honneur.*

THE one great anxiety weighing down the spirits of Florence was the still pending debt to Sir Harcourt. How with honour could she remain under such an obligation to him? Yet her prayers to be allowed to discharge it were unheeded.

"He must," he said, "see her."

His proffered explanation could in no way acquit her of the obligation: this she felt—but how, in the absence of Mrs. Stewart, could she receive the baronet? Had she not already been sufficiently punished by hard judgment because, when in a manner forced upon his protection, she had been seen to enter his carriage?

As she thus meditated, Adèle entered with the evening letters; one among them contained a second urgent entreaty to be present at a masked ball at Mrs. Hamilton's. So urgent indeed was the petitioner that she felt positive pain at the idea of the disappointment her refusal would occasion.

Suddenly a thought flashed across her mind, Sir Harcourt would be there. What if she were to go? Without a shadow of impropriety she could meet him at the house of another; she could then insist upon the discharge of this debt.

Yes, this once she would venture thither—only this once—not to join in the evening's revels—not even to be recognized under the disguise of mask and domino by the throng. Her errand despatched, she would return immediately with Adèle to Eaton Place; the house was still untenanted, and the boudoir and dressing-room undismantled.

Oh, these unhappy impulses! The motive was good and pure, but how strangely indiscreet the act! Beyond the surface, however, Florence never reflected, and there was none near with kindly counsel, except Adèle, who was to attend her mistress and remain in waiting for her, and she thought the plan unexceptionable, "*même ravissante!* None but 'our lady of grace' could have suggested such a bright idea."

Blind mortals both — mistress and maid! Cloistered in their sylvan retreat, denied to everybody, neither dreamed that that very day would hail the wanderer's return.

## CHAPTER XIV.

Who is he  
Standing apart, not mingling with the throng,  
With eye that flashes lightning, and pale cheek,  
And parted lips that breathe deep scorn,  
Hiding despair?

WITH a heart bleeding at every pore, his every energy of mind and body prostrated to the dust by the overwhelming conviction of the apostasy of her he loved, the noble and deceived Castleton ceased to struggle against his doom.

The dream of his manhood had dissolved. The honour of his affianced bride was interwoven with his own, and the disgrace identical. The evidence was all but conclusive, and the effects maddening. Very slowly had he yielded credence to the poisonous tale, but 'twere miserable affectation longer to doubt.

"Oh, Florence!" he exclaimed, in the agony of a despairing spirit, "did no remnant of thy better nature, no one relenting throb of feeling whisper to thy soul of the wreck thou wert consummating, the gulf of inexpressible misery into which thou wert plunging thy wretched victim!"

On again inquiring for Mdle. de Malcé later in the evening, his lordship was informed that she had gone to a masked ball at Mrs. Hamil-

ton's. The name of this lady was another shock, but thither he determined on following her, and that without a moment's delay.

Folding his cloak closely round him, and drawing his hat low over his forehead, he drove to Mrs. Hamilton's. A liberal *douceur* gained him ready admittance there; the lady was not very exclusive.

The rooms, splendidly illuminated, were thickly thronged—so thronged that it would seem scarcely possible to single out any particular individual, but the fevered excitement of his lordship's mind bore him up.

Many a flippant masker accosted him: houris, vestal virgins, Greek slaves, and gorgeous sultanas; but, repelled by the sternness of his aspect, soon passed on to some more courteous knight. In Mrs. Hamilton's circle, however observed, he was pretty certain of escaping recognition.

After a weary quest of nearly an hour, he came upon a smaller and less brilliantly lighted apartment, opening out upon a conservatory. From a fountain playing among rare exotics, a cool, delicious fragrance was exhaled; he entered, for in this room were a lady and gentleman (its sole occupants). The gentleman, attired in the graceful costume of the time of Henry VIII., evidently personated the Earl of Surrey. He

was half masked ; but it was on the lady that the gaze of the earl was riveted. She was enveloped in a dark blue domino, and on her head, concealing its wealth of sheeny hair, was a veil of black lace, the folds of which, partially thrown back, revealed a face of most bewildering loveliness. In one hand she held her mask, in the other a sealed letter. It was Florence. This letter or packet she appeared to be pressing upon her companion with a dangerously bewitching earnestness, while he, with the chivalrous devotion of the period he represented, presently dropped on one knee ; perhaps the ardour of his homage embarrassed the lady, for she drew back with a startled air, turning away her head, and as she did so encountered the fixed gaze of him whom she believed to be thousands of miles away.

A faint cry broke from her blanched lips, and she made a quick movement as though she would fly to his arms, but, spell-bound by that look, she suddenly paused ; the fabled Gorgon's could have inspired no greater terror. Yet it was not the sternness of the gaze, but its expression of mournful solemnity—the woe, the despair, the broken-heartedness it revealed that appalled her.

Clasping both hands over her eyes, she staggered back, and in the next instant fell senseless

into the arms of Sir Harcourt, for he it was who personated the Earl of Surrey, and who hung over her in a state of frenzy, while words of idolatrous worship came pouring forth as from a lava flood. And those words of living fire, whispered though they were in love's softest accents, fell with baleful yet peculiar distinctness upon the tortured ear of the intruder.

Yes, Sir Harcourt hung enraptured over the fair, inanimate form of his affianced wife, on *his* bosom her head reclined, wild kisses were rained down upon her lips! and, with the fire of madness in his veins, Lord Castleton fled the scene.

What more was needed to confirm the tale that woman told? Under her own act and seal his ward stood condemned. On that, and that alone, had he said he would pronounce judgment. He did pronounce it now, and the verdict was—"guilty!"

## CHAPTER XV.

I trusted to the blood of Loredano,  
 Pure in your veins ; I trusted to the soul  
 God gave you—to the truths your father taught you—  
 To your belief in heaven—to your mild virtues—  
 To your own faith and honour *for my own !*

MARINO FALIERO.

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*

He turned him to depart,  
 In helpless—hopeless—brokenness of heart !

THE CORSAIR.

ONCE more his lordship is in Eaton Place, wherefore, with what intent, he did not clearly seek to define. Nothing *was* clear, to the tortured and bewildered sense of the betrayed lover, but that she was false ! and he undone ! The very bonds of reason seemed fast giving way beneath this heavy, insupportable woe. Woe, without name, or hope, or end ! How often, in minds cast in the least suspicious mould, does that subtler sense, misnamed jealousy, lead astray—may it not be that such minds are governed by a too exquisite refinement of feeling ?

There was a vague impression on his lordship's mind that his ward would fly that night with her seducer, for such he now believed the baronet

to be. Had he not in words of flame besought her to do so? true, those words had fallen upon an insensible ear, but vitality restored, would she not listen to that prayer, the prayer of him whom, *lost as she was, she might no longer venture to deny?* And, still echoing that ominous word *lost*, he continued to pace the narrow boundary of that too well-remembered room, the boudoir.

Over a marble console hung a miniature whole length of Florence—how often had he gazed enraptured on the vestal purity shining from out those delicate lineaments!—now, after but a moment's pause, he turned shuddering away.

“Alas! the foulness of disgrace  
Had swept the Venus from her face!”

A bitter smile distorted his lip as he drew aside the curtain that veiled the portrait of the late count. “’Twas a wise precaution,” he muttered, “her father’s shade were a reproach her guilty conscience might not brook.”

And now a loud knocking at the door announced the return of the delinquent, and an avalanche was lifted from the breast of the mourner.

Vainly he tried to still the beatings of his heart as her light footsteps approached. On the landing she stopped, and he heard her in tremu-



lous accents speak to Adèle. He shivered at the sound of her voice, that voice that had once been as sweetest music to his ear. Yet again, at the door, she paused ; it was but for a few moments, yet whole ages of agony would appear to be engulfed in them. And there *are* moments of our life in which we live ages, in which the mind, wound up to the extremest point of human endurance, vibrates, as it were, between life and death—the next throb, the next pulse may snap the thread that bound us to existence. Such moments were these to the devoted Castleton. And where now was his boasted courage, where his inflexible spirit? He clutched at a chair for support, an infant might have borne him to the earth. He did not see her as she entered, but he knew that she was there ; he *felt* her presence in the minutest fibre of his frame.

A death-like silence prevailed, and yet not so, for the rapid pulsations of the heart were audible, distinctly audible. It was Florence who first broke the silence.

“Oh, Stratford, speak to me !” she cried in heartrending accents—“reproach me, kill me !—but speak to me ! turn to me—I cannot—*cannot* endure it !”

And he did turn to her. Oh, heavens ! that hollow and upbraiding eye ! that haggard brow !

that wasted frame! What of suffering did they not reveal to her affrighted senses? Oh, never, surely, had gaze of woman betrayed such unutterable tenderness as was in that now bent on him!

"Stratford! is it thus we meet, after so cruel a separation?"

"Even so, Florence."

"And you are ill, Stratford!" and a trembling hand was laid on his.

"Ill!" he repeated. "Wonder rather that I live. Was it not enough that the report of your unworthiness should reach me in a foreign land, but that I must return hither to hear the maddening tale confirmed? Was it not enough that your weakness and incredulity should have led you into an association with the degraded of your own sex, the most abandoned of ours, but that La Garde, the venerable seat of your ancestors, the home of your childhood, must be trafficked with to minister to the voluptuous tastes, the shameless profligacy, of the last descendant of her race, while the price of her inheritance is squandered at the gaming-table?"

Florence, her head declined, stood the image of pale despair, tears and sighs her only answer to these allegations.

"Yes," he continued, in a tone of yet more mournful solemnity, "I returned to find the

daughter of De Malcé, my own affianced wife, degraded to a female gamester ; and, as if that were insufficient to fill up the measure of *her* guilt and *my* dishonour, to behold her in the arms of a villain ! O sacred shade !” he exclaimed, raising his eyes to the portrait of the dead count, “ could not thy spirit hovering o’er thy child have preserved her from this dread disgrace ? Could not the voice of nature sounding from thy father’s tomb have had power to arrest thee in thy mad career, and save thee from this abyss of misery ?”

“ Stratford ! spare me, for pity ! Have mercy, and forgive !” burst in piercing accents from the penitent, as kneeling at his feet, she clung to him in an agony of remorse.

“ Can pity or forgiveness from him whom your falsehood has destroyed bring back lost honour, Florence ? Never ! Oh, believe it not ! Virtue once extinct in the female breast, can no more be revived than can vitality be imparted to the lifeless corse.”

Very slowly Florence raised her drooping head, as Lord Castleton gave utterance to these strange words. Wildly she gazed into his face, as if in doubt whether she had heard aright ; whether it was in very truth her guardian, her affianced husband, who had breathed this vile

calumny into her ear, who had dared to cast such an aspersion upon her honour.

She had listened to every accusation with a bursting heart indeed, but without a particle of resentment, nor sought by a single sophistry to deprecate the wrath of the accuser; but this—this was the single drop too much. The proud blood of a long, long line of illustrious ancestry flowed through her veins, and though stained by her unpardonable follies, was yet free from the grosser impurity which was here manifestly pointed at.

Proudly she raised herself from her suppliant attitude, and drawing up her beautiful figure, stood in all the dignity of conscious innocence. Every trace of degradation, even of humiliation, was gone. The hectic flush of insulted modesty burnt on her cheek, the brightness of the eye was as the lightning flash, as with a burst of indignation she exclaimed: "I know not, my lord, upon what authority you venture upon language which but in the repetition must brand my cheek with shame! Oh, Stratford, is it you?" And here, impulsive as a child, all fortitude forsook her; unkindness *could not* live in that soft, womanly breast. As again she looked upon that altered face, everything but *his* anguish and *her* remorse were forgotten, and once more laying her hand upon his arm she

pronounced his name in a tone of melting softness: "Say you did not mean this, Stratford; and, oh, forgive me! forgive your erring but repentant Florence. I have suffered so much, been so very, *very* wretched. Oh, say that you will pardon me, your own, your affianced wife!"

She paused—was stopped rather—alas, Florence had her saddest, if not her bitterest lesson yet to learn!

Shaking off the little quivering hand, as though pollution were in its touch, almost fiercely Castleton turned to her. "Affianced wife! affianced, said you? Merciful powers! rather would I link me to the meanest slave that waits subservient on your will, with innocence for her dowry, than call by the sacred name of wife one so lost. Affianced! say rather rejected! for every feeling recoils at the thought of a union with her! The pure and spotless being to whom I *was* affianced lives no longer; every good and holy aspiration is dead within her, and think you I would stoop to the worthless casket, when the jewel for which I would have yielded up life—all, all, but unsoiled honour—has been stolen from it. Think you I could endure the stain of disloyalty affixed to the wife of my bosom, the mother of my children? Never! though the chords of my heart burst in the effort, the sacrifice should be made. How

*I have loved you*"—and the tone, almost appalling in its stern denunciation, here changed to more than woman's softness—"you know too well! The faith solemnly pledged to you shall remain, till life's last sand runs out, unbroken. Oh, never shall another shelter in this weary, loveless bosom! Farewell, lost, unhappy girl, farewell!" and covering his face to conceal its deep of anguish, Lord Castleton staggered from the room.

Motionless as a statue, almost as lifeless, Florence, still in a kneeling posture, gazed aghast at the vacant spot where *he*—her guardian! her lover! almost her husband!—had stood. That he had cast her off, spurned her with such unmitigated contempt, had in it something so incomparably beyond her comprehension to unravel, that it was not till the lapse of many minutes that she could bring herself even to believe she was in possession of her senses.

Renounced by him who with such endless devotion had sought her love, who had seemed to live but in her presence, in the light of her smile! Oh, it was a cheat of the imagination!

Florence had yet to learn that the homage yielded by man to woman is an offering at the shrine of virtue alone; taint that shrine but by one unhallowed breath, and the soul that had

prostrated itself to the dust, recoils from the association.

Prepared though she was for her guardian's displeasure, for she knew how deeply she had sinned, she had never in the wildest dream of her imagination conceived of this ; a rejection in terms of such unqualified scorn, *and on such grounds !* It was all a mystery, a deep, inexplicable mystery.

Rising from her knees, she tried to shake off the nightmare that weighed down her spirit. The reflection of her figure in the mirror startled her ; she shuddered at the contrast between the brightness of her attire and the desolation of her feelings ; she turned her eyes in another direction, and the unveiled portrait of her dead father met her sight. With a cry of horror, a superstitious dread creeping over her, she rushed from the apartment, and gaining her dressing-room threw herself sobbing upon the bed.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

Gray with one night's enormous dread.

OLLIER.

\* \* \* \*

Take back the freedom thou cravest  
Leaving the fetters to me !

WHEN the door closed upon Lord Castleton after his interview with his ward the pride which

had sustained him in her presence gave way. He had seen her for the last time—had spurned, renounced her, whom yet he loved with all, and more than all, the idolatrous worship which had marked his feelings when, kneeling by the side of her dying father, he had sworn never to violate the sacred trust confided to him—that trust he had violated, that pledge he had broken. He had severed the link that had bound them to each other, and with despair in his heart and fever in his brain he hurried impetuously on. He had much to do, he told himself, and but brief time in which to do it, for the conviction was strong within him that he was going mad.

The servants of his lordship's household had taken alarm at his looks on his arrival, and Burton, who was more immediately in attendance on his master, and was now waiting for him, noted to-night his wild and haggard countenance, and followed him into the library, whither he had directed his steps, clearly with no intention of going to bed.

"I shall have letters, Burton, for the early post; I will ring in half an hour. See that I am not disturbed. I am at home to nobody but Mr. Pritchard" (Mr. Pritchard was the family solicitor). "Don't wait."

"My lord, I beg pardon, can I get you anything? coffee?"



"Nothing but a glass of water. Thank you, another, and refill the caraffe."

The man obeyed, and with glazed eyes and lingering, noiseless tread left the room.

With a hand almost as rapid as his thoughts, Castleton penned a letter to his lawyer: "Come immediately on receipt of this, I entreat you. If the fever now burning in my veins will but keep clear of my brain for a few hours, I shall have much to say to you; if incoherent (and this confounded northern climate has half killed me), make what you can of these brief directions. I have unpardonably neglected my duties as guardian to my ward, Mdlle. de Malcé, and her affairs are in consequence seriously embarrassed. Look to them with all possible expedition. Draw on me to any amount, so you clear her estate.

"There is, I am given to understand, a debt of honour to one Sir Harcourt Neville; you will attend to this forthwith, an hour's delay in such a matter is of vital import.

"You have unqualified authority to act in my name,—CASTLETON."

"And now to send to this flimsy coxcomb who is to '*be won to wed a De Malcé*'—save the mark! Oh, if sanity but last out twelve hours longer, his craven blood shall wash out the stain! and if I too fall, it is but by a brief period

anticipating the doom which (vengeance assured) I shall so longingly look forward to ; but for that vengeance God knows how thankfully I could this hour meet that doom."

And the challenge was sent to Sir Harcourt Neville, but when Colonel Rivers on the baronet's behalf waited upon his lordship, a higher will than the will of man had interposed to procrastinate, if not ultimately prevent, the hostile meeting so presumptuously sought by the earl. The fever long rampant in his veins had reached its climax, and chained to his bed it seemed doubtful whether he would not ere long be himself summoned to render up an account at that tribunal before which we must all one day stand, instead of calling on another to yield up his.

The last memory that burnt itself into the distracted brain of the sufferer before absolute madness raged, was the receipt of a small packet from his ward. No letter, no specious defence, no touching appeal for mercy or for pardon met his yearning gaze—not so much as a line, a word; but from an envelope fell, with a tiny sharp rap, the betrothal ring.

## CHAPTER XVII.

Let me play the fool,  
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come.  
MERCHANT OF VENICE.

A FORTNIGHT'S lapse has wrought many changes among the principal actors in this brief history.

Florence once again wanders through the groves of La Garde ; she has gone thither in company with Constance Greville.

Lord Castleton is still a prisoner at his town residence in Park Lane. To the wildness of delirium has succeeded that deadly paralysis of mind and body, so appalling to witness, because so little within the scope of human skill to assuage. Physicians prescribe change of air, not an uncommon thing for physicians to do when all other remedies fail. Oatlands is proposed to his lordship, and, utterly indifferent on the subject, is quietly agreed to.

Lady Graham is disappointed and depressed. The Castleton coronet seems far off as ever ; the savage joy, it is true, is left her, that she has plucked it from off the brow of her rival, but there is the feeling almost amounting to conviction that it will never grace her own.

Her ladyship was gifted with that subtle sense which enabled her, in her last inter-

view with Lord Castleton, to perceive that he shrunk from her, *because* she was the herald of his ward's shame; nor that alone—in the whirlwind of passion that followed her revelation she read the mightiness of his love for another, she saw that though his Roman stoicism might serve him to throw off his bride, she would still retain her hold on his affections.

Very fain would her ladyship have played the Miss Nightingale to the sick knight, but his lordship's orders to his household to be "denied to every one" had been peremptory, and peremptorily were these orders carried out. That shrewd sense which so often stands in good stead of a finer one, enabled the servants of Lord Castleton, even in the face of those orders, to exercise a kind of discretionary power. Lady Constance Greville, Herbert Malgrove, or his ward, had hardly been turned from the door. Was it a superstitious prescience of evil to a master whom they so revered that made them, in the case of Lady Graham, carry out these directions to the very letter? *qui sait?* Her ladyship's thoroughbreds performed their daily circuit from Brook Street to Park Lane, and back again from Park Lane to Brook Street, and her ladyship thereby got an airing, but, alas, for love! it was pretty well all she did get, nor were her written prayers to be permitted

to tend the sick-room regarded with much more favour than her visits. Half a dozen lines, so soon as Lord Castleton was sufficiently recovered, coldly dismissed her ladyship's petition.

There is another sick ward to visit. Sir Harcourt Neville, sad and severely wounded, tosses on his fevered couch in his chambers in St. James's. A pistol ball from a French officer whose sister he had so sorely wronged, has all but terminated his mortal career—youth and the remnant of a once fine constitution did something, providence perhaps managed the rest.

The baronet has not been alone in his sore visitation. The kindly hand of friendship (for even the most dissolute know the colour of that coinage) has smoothed the invalid's pillow, and done its best in a crazy fashion to minister relief, and beguile the tedium of confinement to a measured space of some score feet.

In a moral sense Tom Sedley may take his stand side by side with the gay baronet ; in an intellectual one he is immeasurably below it, nor has he his insinuating and singular fascination. The vaurien has strolled in now, emphatically strolled, for Sedley of the Guards, naturally, not artificially languid, was never known to be in a hurry in his mortal life.

He is come in to retail the current gossip of the day, but he is fatigued with "that deuced *steep ascent* of the stairs."

"And what," inquired the invalid, "is the latest scandal in the fashionable atmosphere?"

"Say scandals, Neville, for I have not heard of any special reform in that quarter, and there are at least a score since yours. Of news, the most disastrous is my failure at Doncaster."

"Ah yes, while you nursed me—that strikes home."

"I didn't mean it should, old fellow."

"I am sure you did not. But if you had not stayed here, like the good Samaritan, pouring the oil and wine into my wound, you might have won an immortality of fame, to say nothing of golden guineas, with those treacherous steeds of yours."

"Hold hard, Neville! you are making no end of a mess of that biblical story of yours; I don't think it was the wine that was poured on the wound, only the oil—it must have been the inward man that the wine restored."

"Ah! I dare say, I won't dispute the point with you since you are so well up in theology, I believe my head was running upon Sterne's Maria though. And so Vixen has really sold you——"

"The jade! yes; Bluebeard topped her by a neck."

"And Beauty? you took the odds on her for a thousand or two, didn't you?"

"Yes; and lost."

"Never!"

"Ay, never! for ever!"

"Why, where was she in the race?"

"Anywhere, nowhere, bolted clean out of the course."

"Disgusting! and Meg Merrilies, is she too extinguished?"

"Yes; I shall sell her if I can get a spoon to bid for her. I thought of Balfour, he's an old friend, you know, and the perfection of noodle-dom. I say, Neville, don't gorgonize a fellow with such a stare as that."

"My dear Sedley, it was a gaze of admiration, I was in a maze on finding you such a logician."

"Well, she's of the true breed, though she won't do for the course. Merrylegs was her dam, you know, and she won the spring handicap. She may go for little more than the value of her saddle girths; that's honest anyhow."

"Ay, Sedley, but you ought to have been on the spot, with thousands at stake; you should have left me to the fate I deserved, and watched the course."

"Oh, I should only have plunged deeper into the mire," drawled the easy-going, self-satisfied epicurean; "I was always the most unlucky dog under the sun. I wonder I don't forswear the turf."

"I wonder we don't do that, and a hundred other sage and righteous things which we do not do, Tom," sighed the sick man.

"Yes; why don't we? for my part I couldn't be worse off under a system of reform. I once had my horoscope drawn up, a division of three septennials, you know. The first kindly premised that the second cutting of my teeth was to be incontinently followed by their being thrust down my throat, consequent upon my descent, at thunderbolt speed, of a four or five flight staircase. The second I pass over, for though it indirectly established the credit of the astrologer, I am not so sure that it did the same by mine. The third prediction may yet be verified in substance, though it chance to be a trifle defective in its chronology. I was to die an untimely death at sea; so that, out of luck from first to last, even my ashes were not to be sepulchred with those of my ancestors of pious memory."

"But, Sedley," sighed the invalid, "if you are hard up say so. I am in funds just now," and a still heavier sigh followed this intimation.

"Well, I don't mind if I do go in for a hundred or so, old fellow."

"Then reach me my desk," and from a private drawer the baronet drew forth a roll of bank-



notes. They were those so eagerly pressed upon him by Mdlle. de Malcé.

The "hundred or so" were detached, and handed to his companion, who, with perfect sang-froid, crumpled them into his waistcoat pocket.

"You see, Neville, there's no keeping afloat on the beggarly allowance of a younger son. Posterity ought to stop with the birth of the heir—that's my opinion."

"And a first-rate opinion it is too."

"Yes ; younger sons only encumber the earth, and bore their friends."

"Very true," murmured the invalid feelingly.

"No fellow can get on without tin."

"Or brass, Tom."

"Well, it goes a great way, but brass is not gold ; now Ernest came in for that délice by the law of primogeniture, and he doesn't deserve it, he's an awful spoon. Never gets in debt, never games, never got into a scrimmage in his mortal life."

"Must be an awful spoon, Tom."

"Yes ; a regular flat. Pays his own bills—that style of thing you know."

"Does he ever pay yours ?"

"Can't say he does."

"Must be no end of a flat, Tom ; but," continued the baronet with affected indifference,

"any further particulars transpired respecting the embassy?"

"No, till Lord Castleton's recovery matters remain in statu quo. The 'Times' reports him still in a precarious state. His removal to one of his seats is talked of so soon as it can be safely effected. Pleasant to be snuffed out in this fashion after reaping such a harvest of glory. His secretary spends a third of his time in Downing Street they say. By Jove, what a fine fellow the secretary makes out that Castleton to be!"

"He is a fine fellow, not a doubt of that, Sedley. By-the-way you didn't chance to hear any cause assigned for this sudden break up of his excellency's health?"

"Well, you *are* a cool hand, Neville; cause assigned—rather! To be sure some assert that the infernal Russian climate is at the bottom of it, but I can't swallow that; everybody knows that the grave senator was stark, staring mad in love with your flame, that splendid skittish little filly the De Malcé, who figured away in the Seymour and Hamilton set; many now go so far as to say he was solemnly contracted to her in spite of that old she-dragon the Graham's denial; anyway it's all up now, the girl has gone to the dogs, and no mistake, regular smash'em and crash'em affair."

"Yes, yes," impatiently murmured the baronet; "but the marriage,—the rupture of the marriage?"

"Well, all kinds of reports are in circulation. It was said his excellency traced the demoiselle to a masked ball, where he found her with her gallant, planning an elopement; and that, after no end of a shindy, he followed her home, with a brace of pistols concealed, brigand fashion, beneath the folds of a mysterious cloak. One for the fair deceiver, the other, *selon les règles*, for himself; but the real truth is, I believe, that finding every stiver in the lady's strong box gone, his lordship coolly gave her the go-by, and then went clean out of his senses. But I am talking you to death, and you're under special orders to be kept quiet. By Jove, Neville, don't you look seedy though! Shall I open the window? Why, you're not really going to faint, are you? Here, take some of the barley-water the old harridan has just brought in. Shade of Soyer, what muck! why you must have the stomach of an ostrich to digest it. Water?—yes, you shall have it, not agreeable, but preferable to the porridge. What an old brute Carlton is to dock you of your Burgundy and Bass at one fell swoop."

And truly the baronet looked in sore need of one or the other.

"This is all very frightful, Sedley."

"What, the barley-water? *Rather*. Pea-soup is crystal to it."

"And this alliance between Lord Castleton and his ward is positively broken off, you think?"

"Oh, all up. The filly, like my Vixen, has bolted—cut clean away to some old tumble-down château in the South of France."

"And can that foolish affair at the masquerade have led to such disastrous consequences?"

"Well, you see, the blockheads ripped up that old scandal of yours, Neville, to back it."

"Of mine?"

"Yes, 'Alonzo the Brave and the fair Imogene.' I shan't forget how you whisked her off from the opera. By Jove! a dainty dish wherewith to tickle the palate of a loyal lover, after a six months' absence from his *fiancée*!"

The sick man groaned.

"Oh, I don't mean to reflect upon you, old fellow. The continence of a Scipio had scarcely been proof against that all-conquering De Malcé. I had serious thoughts of going in for her myself at one time."

"With serious thoughts of succeeding, Sedley?"

The irony was not understood.

"Oh, quite serious at the time; but you see

she went driving to old Harry at such a deuce of a pace, that when it came to the leap I shied. Why, if a fellow does make up his mind to tie himself up in the holy bonds of matrimony, it is only fair he should be in some sort indemnified for the sacrifice. Besides, you had been beforehand with me; and you are, this instance excepted, such a stunner of a shot—to be sure, you refused to fire on the fellow.”

The baronet glanced at the good-natured shallow coxcomb, and touching any explanation of the opera affair, decided that it would be beyond his capacity to apprehend, he contented himself, therefore, with the remark that “the young heiress’s sympathy with suffering, combined with the noble simplicity of her nature, had been the main instrument in precipitating her downfall.”

“By Jove, yes! she was awfully soft.”

“Ay, in the heart, Sedley, she was.”

“Yes; why, she would positively remit a blank cheque to any poor devil that put in a moving appeal. Clap her name down for anything,—didn’t matter what, or to what amount. I’ll give you an instance,—you know Bramley? Gentlemanly fellow, Bramley.”

“Is he?”

“Well, yes; only he is such an awful sponge, and my governor doesn’t come down too hand-

somely in my case, as you know, so at last I thought I'd lend him a trifle."

"What, because you were not too handsomely provided with means?"

"Well, yes; I knew he'd fight shy of me after that, for he was safe never to pay it back."

"Decidedly gentlemanlike, Sedley."

"Well, you see, if a fellow's hard up;—at last he tried Stanton, but Stanton is no fool."

"And so refused him."

"No, only he wanted security for his loan, and asked him to leave his diamond ring with him. It was one of the first water that diamond; but Bramley is a gentleman at heart, and he honestly owned that he had lately been obliged to exchange it for paste."

"So Stanton was sold," smiled the baronet.

"Well, poor Bramley was sold, for the cash was not forthcoming, you see."

"Pshaw! Stanton never believed him?"

"Not believe him, why not? It was deuced honourable of Bramley not to take him in."

"Oh, no fear of Stanton being taken in. He is more than a match for your honourable gentleman, or you either, Sedley. But what all this trash has to do with this noble lady I cannot divine."

"Oh, but it has; for though Stanton is wide

enough awake in his own interests, he can be precious free and easy in the matter of other people's bank-notes, and he recommended him to try his hand with the heiress."

The wounded man actually rose in his bed. "Sedley, you do not mean to say that this fellow, this Bramley, gained access to Mdlle. de Malcé?"

"No; he wrote to her: 'Gentleman in distressed circumstances; estate heavily mortgaged; gaol staring him in the face!' That style of thing, you know. By Jove! she sent him a cheque for a hundred pounds, and begged him not to allow scruples of delicacy to stand in the way of any future application. Bramley's delicacy! Superb, by Jove!"

With an expression of strong disgust, the baronet, feigning a sleepy fit, turned on his side, leaving the sybarite to the luxury of yawning himself into the realms of oblivion on the couch by his side.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

He comes, at last, in sudden loneliness.

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She was my life's unerring light:  
That quenched, what beam shall break my night?

BYRON.

Yes, Lord Castleton left town for his seat in

Devonshire. A carriage was to meet him at the station ; but no joy-bells rung out, no happy faces, no warm greetings, welcomed back the long-absent heir.

All was gloom at Oatlands ! It was known that his lordship was returning home (they always proudly called it his home) ill, and sore stricken by some heavy calamity, but no more was known.

Bowing in silence to the few hanging about the station (and there were very few ; there is an instinctive delicacy in the humbler classes which is above all forms) his lordship stepped into his carriage. As it slowly ascended the hill, and entered the noble avenue with its deep shadow of elm and chestnut, the jaded traveller lifted his eyes ; mechanically they rested upon those fine old ancestral trees, upon the wide extended park beyond, upon that venerable mansion with its stately terraces, and hard and cold as was his gaze before, something of a yet sterner aspect enthroned itself upon his haughty brow, and the pale cheek took a yet paler hue.

"It is over !" he murmured, "who shall now say that the pride of the last of the Castletons is not humbled to the dust ! Ay, the last ! for from our line must pass this fair inheritance."

With a mixture of ceremony and affection, the aged butler conducted his beloved master to the



library, for instinctively he seemed to feel that that favoured spot would be his choice. On his entrance his lordship threw himself upon the nearest seat with such an utter weariness of mind and body that the old man, with eyes blinded by tears, gazed long and wistfully into his face, struck, it should seem, with a something he had never before seen there, a something far beyond any ordinary expression of woe, or of the ravages of sickness. Tenderly he laid his withered hand upon his master's shoulder, and keenly alive to the gentler humanities, Castleton, but for the absorption of his mind, would have answered to that mute appeal; now, however, he was as wholly unconscious of the old man's touch as of his presence.

For more than half a century, Stanton had lived on the Castleton estate; he was born on it; father, grandfather, ay, great-grandfather had lived and died upon it; and freely would that old man now standing there have poured out his life's last blood-drops to serve or save the heir of the house. What had, what could have occurred so fearfully to change him? When he had last beheld him, he was rich in the strength and beauty and pride of manhood, and now—A dreadful idea seized upon the veteran's mind. He had glanced at the deep mourning worn by his lordship; forgetful that his master seldom

wore anything else, and was confirmed in that idea. The heart of every man in Oatlands spoke through him, as from his quivering lips there issued one beloved name, and that name was Herbert Malgrove—"Dead, my lord! Herbert Malgrove dead!" he faltered.

In a moment Castleton was on his feet, his arms tossed wildly in mid-air, every feature convulsed with mortal agony.

"Dead! Herbert Malgrove dead!" he almost shrieked. "My God! my God! when, where, speak, old man! for the love of Heaven, speak!"

Oh, not in that dread moment when the serpent tongue breathed the deadly slander that branded her he loved with foul dishonour, had such fierce suffering wrung the heart and soul of Castleton! But for the support, feeble though it was, of that gray-headed man, he had fallen to the earth.

"My lord! my dear, dear master, forgive me; I thought, I fancied you looked so mournful, I know nothing—yes, yes, alive, alive—forgive me!"

But beyond the simple assurance "that he knew nothing," his lordship heeded not a word. Wringing his faithful servitor's hand, he turned into the grounds, and hours after, he was seen pacing the terrace with feeble, tremulous steps.

And so days and weeks sped on, and brought in their course no mitigation to the deep stern

anguish of the sufferer. Nursing in that profound solitude the memory of his wrongs, divorcing himself by the force of a resolute will from all sympathy with, or recognition of any softening feelings towards her whom but lately he had so idolatrously loved, and whom he only deceived himself in believing he had ceased to love, still longing, with feverish impatience, to meet her betrayer, it is little marvel he should make but slow advances towards recovery. The only words he spontaneously addressed to any of the household comprehended an earnest exhortation to carry out every wish and project of his friend's.

"Let nothing, no one in whom he was interested, be neglected, I do implore you. Is Lady Malgrove at the Rectory?"

"No, my lord."

"Then be doubly vigilant, I charge you; the means are yours; let us not have to blush for supineness in the noble cause, in which one we all so revered laboured so unceasingly." The earl's voice faltered, he turned away.

Many weary hours of the day were spent in traversing the old ancestral hall, heavy with its emblazoned shields and time-worn banners; and beneath those time-worn banners, those gorgeous escutcheons in grim and stately majesty hung the portraits of his lordship's forefathers. Did he, in the contemplation of that long line of

illustrious ancestry, seek to fortify a faltering resolution? did he tremble lest a still lingering weakness for his forsaken Florence should triumph over family pride? In those mute and faded effigies of the dead, what nameless eloquence, what unanswerable arguments! Could aught of living mould have appealed half so powerfully to his sense of honour, could any breathing words have so moved him? To Lord Castleton had been bequeathed a stainless name, and could he affix a stigma to it? Admitting the bare possibility that his ward were guiltless of the heavier sin 'twere madness to think upon, yet could he not take to his bosom one light of conduct, towards whom the world's cold finger had been pointed in scorn; no, the trail of the serpent had passed along the flower, and could scarcely have left the surface of her reputation unsullied.

"He comes too near who comes to be denied."

He clenched his hands above his burning brain, while a despairing "never" issued from his quivering bloodless lips. "Never! never!" resounded through the long vaulted gallery, ominous to the self-doomed victim.

The sole descendant of a lofty line, dating centuries back, recording in its archives no one act of dishonour in its men, in its domestic de-

tails not the faintest blemish among its women, was it for him to bring disgrace upon it ?

The gay and careless, ay, even the profligate, contemplate the bare idea of levity in a wife with a species of horror, how then must it operate on a mind so finely organized as that of the Earl of Castleton ?

Oh, surely it was in the best and purest spirit that he solemnly pledged himself to guard the honour of his house as a sacred behest. And so he stood aloof from human sympathy, alone in his voiceless woe ! a resolved, but mistaken man, mistaken in his estimate of his ward, betrayed thereto by slander's venomous tongue. Again mistaken when he thought to pluck from his bosom the love that had so long nestled there.

And there were times when despair was stronger than human will, and he knew that this could not be ; times when he was ready to exclaim with the dying Giaour—

“ 'Tis all too late—thou wert, thou art  
The cherish'd madness of my heart ! ”

Oh, never might the pale image of his lost love be forgotten ! In the exquisite language of Lord Lytton—“ Never might it cease to pass as a ghost before his eyes ! It looked into his

heart, and kept its likeness there for ever and for ever !”

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## CHAPTER XIX.

All the iron of his strong nature was broken down, and his emotions, long silenced, and now uncontrollable and resistless, were something terrible to behold.—ERNEST MALTRAVERS.

It was at a very late hour one evening that the great park gates at Oatlands were sullenly swung back on their half-rusted hinges to admit a guest, an unexpected, but oh, how welcome a one, for the guest was Herbert Malgrove. Without staying to throw off his travelling-cloak, he was hurrying on, when he was met by Stanton. The faithful fellow greeted him with a fervent “God bless you, sir—God in Heaven bless you, Mr. Malgrove—we may now hope for a change.”

“His lordship is then ill, Stanton?”

“Ay is he, sir, in mind, and the body can’t brave it long that way ; but God be thanked his lordship has sent for you.”

“No, Stanton, no, his lordship does not even know I am in England.”

“No matter, sir, you *are* here, and your shadow never yet crossed a human threshold that it failed to shed balm on it.”

A grateful pressure of the old man's hand, and in the next moment Herbert was in the library, and in the arms of his friend.

All the pent-up tenderness of Castleton's nature gushed forth at sight of the wanderer; even the immediate crushing weight of grief was hushed as he held him in that locked embrace. Wistfully he gazed into the beloved face to see what change time, and sorrow, and failing health had effected. Apparently the scrutiny afforded him little satisfaction, for he turned away with a heavy sigh.

"Nay, never think of me, Stratford, I am well, better. Tell me of yourself, of the meaning of all this. Why, why do I see you thus?"

Castleton smiled a ghastly smile. "You can scarcely have touched the English shores, Herbert, and have need to ask me such a question."

Herbert was not deceived by this forced calmness; he had taken in at a glance the altered aspect of his friend; the deep stern anguish of his soul was written there in characters of blood. The latent sarcasm of his words, more than the wildest storm of anger, betrayed the conflict within. It was the deceitful calm of the smouldering volcano—the strong man bowed, but inflexible, unconquered still.

"And what," inquired Castleton, turning

from the anxious gaze bent on him, "what has brought you home?"

"You!"

"Ah! is it so? I thought the scandal must have crossed the mountains by this time."

"Oh, Stratford, do not wear that cynic smile—tell me, I conjure you, what is this scandal?"

"Why then, Herbert, this it is: that the name of Florence de Malcé, my erstwhile affianced bride, is as a thing of scorn in men's mouths, and that I, her deceived and miserable dupe——"

"Hold! hold! I cannot—will not hear this!"

"No, do not; the subject is a worn one now, and but a loathsome one at best—we will dismiss it; your welcome home shall not be sullied by such memento, for God knows how welcome you are. I did not guess, till I saw you, that my heart had still so much of the human left in it."

"Why, what has changed—what has so chilled a heart once all warmth and tenderness?"

"Why, what chills—what breaks men's hearts? Pshaw! Herbert, they won't break—'tis a woman's tale—but they will turn to stone. Enough of this; if you know the gross amount, spare me the revolting details. Let us see, Stanton—I have not suffered your room to be disturbed—you must be fatigued."

His lordship spoke eagerly—rapidly.



"Summon no one. I shall not leave the library to-night."

His lordship sighed, and folding his arms, paced the room in silence. At last Herbert rose; "Castleton," said he, laying his hand impressively on his friend's shoulder, and looking in his face with that sad but tender melancholy so peculiar to him, "you once appealed to our boyhood's love, to the yet deeper and stronger feelings of our manhood, in urging a confidence too tardily reposed in you; I re-echo your words; by our boyhood's love, by our manhood's deep strong-tried affection, I do conjure you tell me, what has wrought this fearful change in you."

Castleton turned abruptly, almost wildly, upon him; yet even at that moment, amid the fierce war of passion within, the old look of love and reverence for his friend gleamed out from that haughty eye. "But that you have moved me, Herbert, as none other has the power to do, I could well-nigh smile at your urging from me a revelation of that which wags the tongue of every coxcomb in the metropolis. Why, man, the public journals blazoned forth the shameful tale an age ago."

"What, that your ward, yet in the tender flush of womanhood—a novice in a world she is left to battle with alone—proves herself no financier, and becomes, or rather her fortune,

the prey of the mercenary and designing, whose real characters her innocent and unsuspecting nature could scarcely be expected to fathom—is this the tale so rife at St. James's ?”

Castleton paused in his rapid walk, and a tide of crimson shame mounted to the very brows as he turned on his companion a look of most mournful solemnity.

“Alas ! you are indeed ignorant of the turpitude of this most wretched girl. Here, Herbert, here ! bend down your head, my friend, I tell you that—that she, who would have been my wife, is—is—God ! God ! I cannot speak it,—spare me, Herbert, spare me !” A cry of intolerable anguish, a cry as if a human soul were rent in twain, escaped the miserable man. “The past is nothing—she is nothing now !”

In his locked hands he buried his face, and a silence as of the grave ensued. There was something almost awful in that unbroken stillness ;—no, not unbroken, for ever and anon a stifled sob broke over it. A woman's anguish it is sad enough to witness, but there is, in the blood-drops distilled from the proud and bursting heart of the strong man, a something sadder still ; it appals you, strikes you down, paralyzed and dumb, helpless—because hopeless of cure.

Yet once again the loving hand of Herbert

was laid impressively upon his friend's arm, and again that thoughtful melancholy eye sought the very depths of his.

"And from whom, Stratford, had you this coward lie?"

Castleton's head was still bowed over his clenched hands, but at these words he looked up with an expression of dreamy wonder—he returned no answer however.

"Why, Stratford, you do not believe this monstrous tale?"

"Hear me, Herbert," and the voice seemed as if it issued from a sepulchre. "I saw her in his arms, her head reclined upon his bosom; his breath was on her cheek, his kisses on her lips—nay, ask me no more, my brain's on fire," and from his starting eye-balls a glare, like that of the tiger, flashed forth. "Or I or the insulter had now lain low enough, but that while I was sunk in wild delirium, Beaugard's vengeance, anticipating mine, disabled him; but he lives!"—and a smile, oh, such a smile, lit up the ghastly features—"thank Heaven he yet lives for a day of fearful reckoning. I would not have him die by other hands than mine!"

"Stratford! this to me!"

"To you, Herbert—to my God, should I hold myself sinless in this act. Hear me: Beaugard's sister expired a few weeks since, the

victim of his baseness — expired — mark me, in a lazar-house. Know you of whom I speak? Of one Sir Harcourt Neville. Why it were a deed of righteousness to rid the world of such a monster.”

A shudder passed over the frame of Herbert, as much excited by the terrible frenzy of Castleton as by the depravity of Sir Harcourt.

“Be you well assured, Stratford, of the existence of the crime with which you charge this man ere you stain your hand with murder.”

“Murder! this is a new reading.”

“But the true one—anyway you view it, a most foul offence; but with the avenging spirit now urging you on, murder!” but apparently his companion heard him unmoved.

When a somewhat calmer mood succeeded to this outburst, Herbert gathered some further particulars respecting Mdlle. de Malcé, though strangely enough the name of Lady Graham did not transpire; the house to which Castleton followed his ward on the memorable night of his return; Sir Harcourt's presence there; the letter he saw her even press upon him; but here Malgrove interrupted him.

“Still I am lost in perplexity. How, let me ask, did your ward receive the insulting freedoms of this man?”

“Nay, I know not; her unprepared sight of

me seemed to strike terror to her guilty soul—she became insensible—and I fled the accursed sight.”

“Before her recovery?”

“Before her recovery—yes.”

“But forgive me, I am still in the dark ; prior to this insensibility, which you infer ensued upon thus suddenly beholding you, did she, by any levity, encourage or permit Sir Harcourt’s audacity?”

“To me, Herbert, all savoured of levity ; but I would not do her wrong. Judging her by the licensed profligacy of the circles she moves in, she might perhaps stand acquitted. Enough—her guilt is established.”

“Not to my mind ; for what occurred when her senses fled she cannot surely be responsible. Once before,” Herbert proceeded, in a low but emphatic tone, “one knelt at her feet, bathing her hands with tears, one on whom, with all the accompaniment of tears and sighs, she pressed a letter ; yet at that moment her spirit was with her dead father alone, her fondest affections in your keeping. You wronged her then—may do so now. Are you sure that you are not yourself the victim of false and malignant report, anterior to this circumstance ? Your jealous susceptibility would naturally take alarm at this seeming confirmation of such report. That there is some *inexplicable* mystery involved I am convinced,

one which we must fathom ; meanwhile I will only ask you who it is that has dared to stab the fair fame of your all but wedded wife ?”

“ Forbear, Herbert !” haughtily interrupted his lordship, “ breathe not that name again, as you value our friendship. *Wife ! my wedded wife ! Great Heaven !*”

“ I am then to infer that you hold Mdlle. de Malcé unworthy to bear the name and honours of the house of Castleton ?”

“ Alas, Malgrove !” he returned, and there was a touching despondency in his manner, that contrasted strangely with the fierce passion of the moment before, “ the name and honours of the house of Castleton may soon be extinct, but as its latest descendant I will not tarnish them, I will not pander to my own dishonour. No, Herbert,” he continued, with a sickly smile, “ the race of Sigendorf is past !”

He spoke no more till Herbert, in whose mind a strong suspicion existed that foul wrong was done to Mdlle. de Malcé, and who was proportionately anxious to work out her justification, at once struck the chord of his affections, the strongest in Lord Castleton’s proud but generous nature.

“ Yet, surely, Stratford, oh ! surely you *once* loved Florence de Malcé ?”

“ Loved her !” he re-echoed, with a burst of

almost awful emotion—"once loved her! O God! Thou knowest how deeply and how truly!"

Malgrove might, indeed, and he knew it, have spared the question. That haggard brow, that wasted frame, those hollow eyes, were sure and certain vouchers of the depth, nay, fearfulness of his passion.

"Oh, Malgrove!" he went on, and Herbert shuddered at the mournful intensity of his voice, "you know not, none may ever know, how absorbing has been my love for her—it filled my whole being, it mastered every faculty of my soul. Life was one long, long thought of her. All that men sigh for, ambition's glittering dreams, fame, fortune, all, all had fallen before the omnipotence of a passion which she has flung from her; scorned, despised, and trampled upon, and oh, worst pang of all!—dishonoured! No, ask me not, Malgrove, with what adoring worship I bowed before her young soul's purity, ere it had caught a taint of earth! Oh, not the breath of angels had shed a tenderer, holier atmosphere around than did that spirit's light shining forth from its crystal home. Not before God's own throne had I knelt with lowlier adoration than to this pure emanation from His hands, for then it was no idolatry to kneel. And she could turn to this—to this!"

In utter unbelief of Mdlle. de Malcé's dis-

loyalty, however constrained to allow her weakness and imprudence, Malgrove was solely intent upon showing her conduct in a less flagrant light than, from the lofty and stern virtue of his friend, he would be led to regard it, but in the excited state of his mind he was forced to proceed with the utmost caution. If he left him to his own dark surmises, he well-knew that his separation from his ward was certain, and his future a blank.

"I conclude you are able to estimate your ward's outlay during your absence."

Castleton merely bent his head in reply.

"Vast sums I am told were expended in raising up the oppressed and indigent. No misery went unredressed."

"I do think this—I do believe this—oh, not, Herbert, for her reckless prodigality, do I condemn her," and Malgrove noted with a swell of joy the softening tone of these words. "I knew, and loved her the better for it, that her whole fortune were inadequate to meet the requirements of her large and generous soul, hence my resolve to affix no limit to her expenditure."

Malgrove shook his head: "Most unwise resolve."

"Nay, Herbert, I was proud to see her scatter wealth; blest, most blest in administering to her tastes—her luxurious tastes, if you will.—



No, all this at worst but proved her prodigal, but should she have given no thought to the liquidation of her just debts, to the many who suffered by her heedless folly ?”

“ She *should* have done so, but the skilful management of her finances was never assumed to be in the category of Mdlle. de Malcé’s accomplishments, any more than prudent forethought. Reflection is the alchymy that turns all knowledge into wisdom; your ward’s talent, unhappily, does not lie in that direction; I fear many of tried experience, among our fashionable wives and daughters, preserve a strict neutrality between their debts and their thinking faculties.”

“ But I did not choose a daughter of fashion, Herbert.”

“ No, Stratford, you dared a more adventurous risk; you chose a lovely wild flower, a being innocent and untamed as the young fawn that sported by her side in the knolls and glades of her father’s park—a very Una, that had only gauged the world through the rich poetry of her fervent fancy, and warm and susceptible heart, and then you plunged her, with her quick fresh feelings, her untaught ardent nature, and her surpassing loveliness, into a world where vice and folly hold eternal revel, and this, too, without a pilot to guide her through its devious and most treacherous windings. Had you

deliberately sat down to plan her ruin, you could scarcely have taken more effectual steps to ensure it."

Lord Castleton moved uneasily on his chair.

"Oh, Stratford!" continued the generous Herbert, "your ward is wronged past utterance—my life upon her unstained honour! For the graver offence with which she stands charged, I hold it an infamy to admit the necessity for vindication."

It may excite surprise that the haughty and inflexible Castleton should patiently submit, even from Herbert Malgrove, to such a remonstrance; but in the first place *it was* this beloved friend from whom it came; in the next every reproach heaped on himself seemed in some sort to lessen the guilt of his lost but still idolized love—and to lift but a portion of the odium from that dread crime, ever in the van of her offences, he had smiled beneath the torture of the Hindoo. Was it—could it be that his ward had, as Malgrove said, been sorely wronged? Oh, the flush of joy that thought inspired! but, alas! in the face of the solemn lie that woman told, and the after evidence of his own eyes, hope died out; it was, nevertheless, in a subdued and even deprecatory tone that he next spoke—

"Yet a gamester, Herbert—do you defend a gamester?"

"I withhold my judgment on this head till I have better authority than your bald assertion for the fact—you were abroad at the time, there may be some error."

"Yet a mortgage on her inheritance was attempted, for the liquidation of a gambling debt, and to this man. I hold, alas! the witness of her offence in a deed, which she imagined legal, bearing her signature. That such a thought should have been born of a young and tender girl!"

• "It is far more probable that it was foreshadowed by another and subtler brain; whose we know not, but we should leave no means untried to discover—your duty, as guardian, involves the necessity for the most minute investigation of this and every other matter in connection with your ward."

"Nay, all is over, Herbert—she now knows that I have resigned all claim to the title of guardian, even as I had already done to that of a far dearer one," and the voice faltered, not for the first time.

"I question your right to resign the guardianship of this poor orphan girl; judicially, I question it. It is at best a pitiless thing to do."

"God knows, Herbert, I will flinch from no duty that may in the remotest degree serve her.

Indeed, I have recently received full authority—nay, a brief command—to open all letters and papers whatever lying at her house. Some have been forwarded from town. These are from La Garde.”

“From La Garde? La Garde!”

“Yes; she is with Constance at La Garde.”

“Not then in the arms of a successful seducer, but in tender companionship with the purest of God’s creatures, is this much-traduced lady. Engaged in an illicit correspondence, yet sanctioned, nay exact, from an affianced husband, an examination of that correspondence—of her private papers, in short. ’Tis passing strange.”

From his desk Castleton handed an open letter to his friend. “This,” he said, “is my authority.” It was from Constance. At sight of that well-remembered hand, Herbert gave a little gasping sigh;—that pale cheek could scarcely become paler, those mournful features hardly take a sadder expression, for the misery of his friend touched him very nearly; but the grief that has no death looked from out the earnest eyes, and told of the inner conflict. It was but for a moment you might read such meaning, in the next he was absorbed by the contents of the letter. He was evidently forcibly struck by its style, so much at variance with the gentle feminine nature of the writer. She had in this

instance adopted on behalf of her friend a cold high tone, a tone as of one deeply wronged, yet scorning to enter upon any defence. A lofty and proud independence was traceable throughout.

Herbert read aloud from the letter, clearly not without design :—" ' Directions have been given to forward all letters, papers, and memoranda whatsoever, for the purpose of being submitted to your lordship. Mdle. de Malcé makes no appeal to your compassion, still less to your affection ; but as her guardian, the sole title by which henceforth she recognizes your lordship, I claim on her behalf thus much attention to her affairs from your sense of right.' "

Slowly Malgrove refolded the letter. " And you could have the heart to throw up the guardianship after this, Stratford ? "

" Nay, I was a raving maniac when it reached me. The letter is still unanswered. "

" I am very glad of it, very glad. Then in your reply ' let mercy season justice,' and what you can't forget, forgive. My life upon it, this lady is foully slandered. Think you that one good and pure as Constance Greville would choose guilt as her daily, hourly companion ? Believe it not. "

" It is but another proof, Herbert, that woman is capable of the most generous, the most heroic sacrifices. "

Herbert shook his head. "To my mind, Stratford, it proves nor more nor less than simply this: a profound conviction in the mind of the most faultless of beings of the innocence of your ward—innocence of the offence you impute to her. To raise up the drooping child of guilt and misery, to proffer all that pitying sympathy and love may do, to lure back to virtue's paths by the strong yet tender hand of mercy—to do all this, and much more, would but faintly shadow forth the almost divine perfections of Lady Constance; but to suppose—for one moment to conceive—that she would become the fixed associate of one on whom guilt, positive guilt, has set its seal, were to err against nature, nay against virtue itself. The pure cannot pair with the impure; as soon might fire and water resolve themselves into one element; they may succour, soothe, and pardon, but not go hand in hand with them through life. Ah, Stratford—

" 'It needs

The intuitive decision of a bright  
And thorough-edged intellect to part  
Error from crime.'

Between weakness and depravity there is a wide, wide line of demarcation."

What such reasoning was effecting, what softening influences were slowly gathering round

the darkened, or rather benumbed, faculties of his hearer, could only be partially guessed at, for Castleton had again bent his head over his locked hands.

"Everything," said Herbert, presently, "is, I presume, in fair train for the settlement of your ward's affairs?"

His lordship looked suddenly up. "They are in Pritchard's hands; but he tells me the liabilities on the estate were comparatively trifling. The town-house, with its appointments, went to the hammer, and with the proceeds the debts were liquidated, even her gambling debts."

"Noble girl! Oh, Stratford!"

"But why, why have incurred these last? A female gamester! Horrible!"

"Well, I must learn how she was seduced into play before I denounce her as a gamester—who was the tempter—what the motive—whether it was a pastime or a speculation with her—a resource from the inanity of fashionable folly, or a Lethean draught wherein she sought to drown the memory of some piercing sorrow, for you will scarcely deny her acute sensibility."

"Does Herbert Malgrove advocate the dangerous doctrine that 'there are crimes made venial by the occasion?'"

"No, Stratford; but I do advocate in a gentle

woman's case the milder doctrine of forbearance—just so much tolerance as may be meted out by the strong to the weak, by the world-wise to the uninitiated. The frail bark that puts out to sea needs, even in a calm, some skill to navigate it safe into harbour, but if left and abandoned to the tempest's wrath, what marvel if it be wrecked? What marvel that this helpless girl, launched on the ocean of life, utterly incapable of sounding the depths of the yawning abyss, falls, and falls—I pray you to comprehend me” (and Herbert spoke with impressive significance)—“from the loftiness of your ideal, your impossible standard, for she is the acknowledged star of the fashionable world, always a dangerous pre-eminence, stained, it may be, with innumerable follies, but I will hope, I do believe, unpolluted by vice.”

“It cannot be but that you deceive yourself, Herbert. Oh, that I could indeed believe her unsullied by crime! If the forfeiture of my life might bring back lost honour, I should hold it too cheaply purchased.”

“Castleton, divest yourself, I implore you, of this monster-thought which more stains your own noble nature than injures the purity of your so lately affianced wife. In her utter desolation, I claim to be the champion of her honour, and I charge you to desist from offering



her further outrage. Oh, Stratford! can you indeed recall to memory that face of spotless innocence, from which her eyes, the very mirrors to her soul, beamed forth with such enchanting modesty, and hold to such a creed?"

Castleton writhed in agony. "Spare me, Herbert, the remembrance of all she *was*; enough for me that I know her for what she *is*, and knowing this, feel that in this world we are separated for ever."

"Cruel and unjustifiable decision, whatever weight of suspicion may hang over her. Guileless you left her when you quitted England, and can she in six short months have so changed her very nature as to have become the guilt-stained being you would persuade yourself she is? The barriers of decorum, the refinements of womanly delicacy, are not thus rudely broken down. You must sap the foundation ere you can uproot the tree. Oh, I have seen that fair virgin cheek turned away beneath the ardour of your gaze, ashamed of its own modest blush! She who with such timid grace received the tokens of a virtuous love, could scarcely step aside to revel in a polluted one, and that, too, ere the embers of her first young passion had had time to chill. Ah, no, Stratford, the instincts of your own loyal nature give the lie to anything so preposterous."

As Castleton's figure was half turned off, Malgrove could not see the workings of his features, nor knew that at that moment he could have prostrated himself at his feet, and blessed him for this tribute to his still-idolized Florence; while the very inflexibility which Herbert so unsparingly denounced, was but the tension of a mind well-nigh wrought to madness by the disloyalty of her he loved. Herbert still fancied him unmoved, and for once even his kindly nature was something chafed by this lofty and unbending spirit. "Yet were it, could it be possible that it were so," he continued, "that not alone error, but guilt, had marked her course, yet are you not justified in this cold treason. No, it should have been all too powerless to cancel a vow sanctified by a father's dying blessing. To his child you stood pledged by every solemnity which men call holy and binding, and it is miserable sophistry by which you would seek to absolve yourself of that oath. How will the knightly honour, the chivalrous generosity, of Lord Castleton brook the imputation, though but to his own soul, of broken faith? Will he hold fealty to his dead ancestors, yet break it to a helpless woman?" Still no answer to his appeal. "Stratford, is it you who, having called forth all the 'warm soul's precious throbs in this

young tender breast, can now coldly and deliberately resolve to shake her off to beggarly divorcement? Speak to me no more of your love. If she had been enshrined within your heart, you'd have plucked it from out your bosom ere cast her from it."

Slowly, as if life were ebbing away, Castleton lifted his eyes to his friend's. "It may save me from life's worst curse, madness, Malgrove, if you can prove your words a truth, that I have ceased to love her, all guilt-stained though she be. 'There is a worse death than the pause of life.' For is it not the climax of human agony to know the thing you worship unworthy your idolatry? I called madness a curse;—it were mercy to this knowledge. Bless God, my friend, that on that dread night you wot of I escaped the coward's crime—suicide. Life was so heavy a burden, release from it so sore a temptation. The thought of you alone stayed my hand; it had been a blow to you, Herbert."

Appalled as he was by these fearful words, spoken in a tone of such sad earnestness, Malgrove yet felt that this was no time to reason on them.

Oh, surely the face of living man never wore such corpse-like pallor as that which now shadowed Lord Castleton's.

"Try to sleep, Stratford. There, there, I will not reproach you, but, by your eternal hopes, never, *never* let me hear such words from your lips again;" and Malgrove drew forward a couch some loving hand among the household had silently placed there, and, heart-sick and weary, Castleton sunk down upon it, while Herbert watched beside him with the tenderness of a mother over the cradled sleep of her child.

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## CHAPTER XX.

O, I were damn'd beneath all depth in hell,  
But that I did proceed upon just grounds  
To this extremity.

OTHELLO.

GRIEF holds her court in the mansions of the rich no less than in the mud-clad hut of the meanest hind; boundless in her range, she strikes down the noble as well as the serf. What sadder tragedy than the deep, stern, wordless despair of a strong human heart!

Beside Lord Castleton's couch still sits the devoted friend, racked by anxiety, perplexed in the extreme, yet not without brave hopes of ultimately succeeding in establishing the innocence of Mdle. de Malcé.

The second evening of his return was fast closing in, and though he knew that his argu-

ments had not been without their weight on the sufferer's mind, he remained unconquered, inflexible still.

Again and again Herbert referred to the letter of Constance, and again little less than conviction of the loyalty of Florence fixed itself in his mind. He attached so much value to the judgment of Constance—so much to her acute and delicate perception and her true woman's heart.

If Castleton could but be prevailed upon to see his ward—if he could but bring about an interview—for he was ignorant that one had taken place between them after the masquerade—she might, and he was sanguine in his belief that she would, explain away so much over which the cloud of mystery now hung.”

“If you would but see her, Stratford.”

“Cui bono?”

The faintest perception of displeasure was in Herbert's tone as he replied—

“For your own satisfaction ; somewhat, perhaps, for the satisfaction of others.”

“Then must those ‘others’ court the interview ; for me, I *have* done so, and am satisfied.”

“I would you were—hear me, Stratford—nay, do not turn away, the subject is, I know, a painful one.”

“Ay, is it, and painfully prolonged.”

"Then end it—see her."

"I have done so."

"Yes; but not alone. Is a crowded ball-room a place for two fond, however divided, hearts to meet in? See her where heart can speak to heart; see her alone."

"Herbert! I have done so."

"But not in private; not alone."

"In private; and alone."

"How! you never told me this, and—and she denied these charges? I am sure she did."

Eagerly, vehemently he spoke.

"Not one tittle of them."

"Nor in any way explained them?"

"In no way; she heard and answered—nothing."

"No defence of the mortgage," groaned Herbert, "none of the gambling transaction?"

"Of neither; *she but sought on bent knee, forgiveness.*"

"Which you denied?"

"Denied; and left her!"

"May God forgive you, Stratford! for the time will come when you will not forgive yourself. Poor child! poor hapless outcast! Well, 'God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.'"

Castleton moved away; the scene of his final separation, thus to his sense again rehearsed, had broken through the kind of benumbed calm that

had succeeded to the passion of the preceding day, and once more all was tumult within.

And now what could Herbert urge? For the first time his ardent spirit sunk within him. He turned almost in despair to the papers lying in a scattered heap on the library table; the hope was very faint that anything could be gathered from them in excuse for her who had no excuse to offer for herself.

At first only bills, many to an almost fabulous amount, rewarded his search, all, however, he noted with joy receipted anterior to Castleton's return; why, why had she been cursed with fortune! Presently, his eye lighted on other matter, the collection was miscellaneous; "humble, heartfelt acknowledgments for aid in the hour of need, flippant demands for gratuities, cringing petitions for loans, &c.," glaring impostures for the most part, still though weak enough in law and logic, as arguments, they nevertheless armed her generous champion with some shadowy sort of defence in the prodigal's behalf, and once more he returned to the attack further encouraged by the strong emotion, so significant of reviving tenderness, which he had just witnessed.

"Do you know, Stratford, it seems to me that the immoderate expenditure into which your ward has been betrayed is traceable rather to the splendid prodigality of an untried nature

than to the senseless extravagance to which it has been ascribed ; to a refined and too highly cultivated taste ; a dangerous one if you will ; but the ardent of imagination, the impulsive and generous, are precisely those on whom danger soonest lights, as the finest metal most readily imbibes the rust. I know you will say, for your judgments are severe, that you have small sympathy with splendid vices ; and yet there is much in your own temperament that is akin to them. While all that is elevated and noble belongs to your nature, yet is that nature a more passionate than prudent one. How little of the restraining influence of caution lies within you ! Need I remind you of your princely income as a minor, and of its total inadequacy to meet your requirements—yet would I rather pronounce this prodigality than profligacy, lavish generosity not reckless waste.”

“Have I ever defended my own infirmities—vices, if you will—Herbert ?”

“No ; nor do I allow them to be vices ; but why must the same errors be more harshly dealt with in a woman, in this case a very child in experience ? From amidst the mass laid to her charge, can you not winnow one poor redeeming virtue that may plead with ‘mercy’s silver tongue’ in her behoof. Ah ! glissez mortel n’appuyez pas !”



Still, though evidently powerfully moved, Castleton remained silent.

“Do not mistake me Stratford; I desire to set up no specious defence of your ward’s conduct, though, from my inmost soul, I believe it admits of much extenuation. Brought up in scarcely less than cloistral seclusion to the period of her father’s death, she is, at little more than eighteen years of age, with the fatal heritage of radiant beauty, rank, and fortune, launched on a world, of which, alas! she too soon becomes the acknowledged idol, while with a refinement of delicacy most prejudicial to her moral safety, the circumstance of your betrothal is sedulously concealed from that world; hence, despite your anxious surveillance, she is speedily surrounded with the gay and dissipated of our sex, the worthless of her own. Did you imagine she could pass through this ordeal unscathed? did you expect from this child of nature, this—but half-blown flower—the wisdom of the sage, the prescience of the worldling? did you *desire* that her critical acumen should discriminate between the weak and the vicious, when the outward seeming was in each so fair? She must be something of a deceiver herself—Stratford, who can so easily detect artifice in another, and even if her discernment had penetrated the veil that sought to conceal the guilt, her woman’s heart had per-

chance forgiven it ; they err, who deem the pure, the soonest shocked by contact with the impure ; their very exemption from sin, saves them from a full apprehension of its existence ; or at least teaches them the omnipotence of mercy, rather than of denunciation. Ah, Stratford ! with your thirty years' experience tried against her extreme youth and ignorance, are you prepared to render a faithful account of your stewardship as guardian, if nothing more, to this doubly orphaned girl ? Have you betrayed no trust, violated no pledge, neglected no duty ? Bethink you, whether your own culpable indulgence on her introduction to the world has, not been fatally prejudicial to her. Why have permitted an unlimited expenditure ? It was a premium upon waste ; neither did her own income as a minor warrant it. Why, too, by another act of subtle delicacy, more perilous still, leave her ignorant of the fact, that your fortune supplied her capricious, and luxurious wants ? why tempt her to her own undoing, for what, with one avowedly profuse and thoughtless, could so speedily effect it, as unlimited credit ? Oh ! trust me, she has been hardly dealt with," he continued, warming with the ardour of his appeal, " and now, now, in her hour of utmost need—when the mildew breath of slander is working her destruction, when her

reputation trembles in the balance, and your support or desertion would turn the scale, and raise her up, or for ever sink her—you, her sole earthly stay, in whom are centred her whole wealth of love and trust, whistle her down the wind, the prey of fortune ; but ‘let the stricken deer go weep’ while you, who hold all human passions under control, triumph in your cold prerogative of most excelling virtue. What reckes it that a tender woman’s heart lies crushed and bleeding at your feet so that your proud escutcheon is unsoiled !”

At these words, every feature working with irrepressible passion, Castleton started to his feet.

“Cease, Malgrove, I charge you cease, if you would not see me a raving maniac !”

In truth, Malgrove had probed him to the quick, the last shaft above all had sped home, the iron entered his very soul.

“Oh, Herbert ! let me but once again dream she is the spotless being I once believed her, nay, but prove her guiltless of the one crime it were worse than death to breathe, and I will kneel and bless you ! And yet—yet—if she be innocent,” he paused, and it was as if a whirlwind swept across that haggard brow, and lit up the flashing eye—“if she is abused—why, what then am I ? what

this woman? Yet, prove me villain, and I will bless you for the proof!"

"What woman, Stratford? Of whom speak you?"

But apparently he was not heard.

"Stratford! my friend! speak, I conjure you, to whom do you allude?"

Still Castleton did not heed him; some scattered memories he seemed trying to recall.

Again was the question repeated, and with redoubled earnestness. What light was breaking through the darkness?

"To what woman did you refer?"

"Why, to the arch-fiend, it may be."

"But the woman—you spoke of some woman?"

"Ay, did I—of Lady Graham. Of whom else should I speak?"

"Lady Graham!" and Malgrove recoiled as though a scorpion had stung him. "Lady Graham!"

"*Lady Graham.* I thought you knew my informant—you seem surprised."

"No, no," he answered dreamily, and drawing in his breath with a gasp, "not, I think, surprised—a little startled, perhaps—no, not surprised, but—*satisfied*—*quite* satisfied, for I read Mdlle. de Malcé's acquittal in the revelation of that one name. Blind idiot that I have

been! I might have known the quiver from whence came the shaft by its peculiar venom. Oh, Stratford! it is not, it cannot be upon the testimony of this cold, malignant woman that your ward, your bride, almost your wife, stands charged with a crime so infamous that I have not hitherto dared to name it. Speak, if only one word, and tell me whether it is upon this, and this alone, you have pronounced your merciless verdict?"

But there came no sound from Stratford's quivering lips, only a gaze of horror, as though he were stiffening into stone.

"Stay, let me think. When you went to Russia, leaving God's wandering lamb the while to bleat unheeded, shivering, in the pitiless air, you constituted this woman in some sort guardian over your ward—am I right?—and she deserted her post when dangers gathered thickest round her, poor enmeshed victim! So, so; 'tis she has poured the poison in your cup, and drugged your happiness; she it is who insinuates that an alliance with a De Malcé will dishonour the house of Castleton, and ultra rigid in decorum, noble in disinterestedness, steps in to save it from pollution. The means are worthy, pray Heaven the end be not won."

Never had the amiable Malgrove spoken with such caustic gusto; he literally seemed to revel

in the abandon of language he employed in this outburst of indignant feeling.

At last Castleton found tongue to answer, but it was in a low, broken voice.

"On mere insinuation, Herbert, I did not condemn; it was on the most solemn asseveration on the part of her ladyship, the most conclusive testimony of her guilt."

"I doubt it not, I doubt it not. She would consummate her fell design; the poisoned shaft she had sent into the quivering flesh she would leave there to fester and gangrene."

"You never liked Lady Graham, I remember."

"Never; but you did, and believed in her."

During the pause that ensued Castleton was again lost in some memories connected with her ladyship's frightful revelation.

"Stratford," said Malgrove, who now spoke in almost a cheery tone, "listen; you are too proud a man to be a vain one. Did it never occur to you that the widowed and slenderly dowered Lady Graham (for the estate, as you know, is strictly entailed) might not altogether object to encircle her brows with the coronet of an earl?"

"I never wasted a thought upon the matter," he responded with much naïveté and more indifference.

"Truly, you are no coxcomb."

"Why, what's Hecuba to me, or I to Hecuba?"

"If you are not much, very much to her ladyship I am strangely out in my reckoning."

"Why, in what way am I concerned in her speculations?"

"Every way, I suspect, and a vainer man would long since have discovered that, hard and cold as is the nature of this woman, she has warmer feelings than those of friendship for the Most Noble the Earl of Castleton. I more than suspected this unhallowed passion (for she was then a wife) years ago, when we met her abroad."

Calmly Castleton heard him, but so far as her ladyship's sentiments stood affected, no emotion of any kind, whether of surprise or pleasure, scorn or anger, was discernible; it would seem that he scarcely thought the matter worth a comment; but as Malgrove proceeded to draw certain deductions from the fact, and finally avowed his belief that his ward had been sacrificed to this passion of Lady Graham, sacrificed to her jealousy, her ambition, and her malignancy, a thousand lightnings flashed from his eyes—ten thousand furies! Not all the prayers of Malgrove could restrain him in the utterance of the most deadly invectives against her whom, with a rapid revulsion of feeling common to high and passionate natures, he now denounced as the

author of all his misery. No, the spirit Herbert had evoked he might not so easily lay, for his words had at last struck full conviction upon the slumbering faculties of his friend, and the serpent lay uncoiled in all its hideousness.

It was not till the lapse of a considerable time that Castleton was sufficiently calmed to enable him to give a more detailed account of the revelations made by her ladyship. He ended by placing her letter in his friend's hands; but no pen might convey the faintest idea of the emotion with which it was read. Disgust for the author of the perjury predominated over his deep commiseration for the traduced.

"Well," he burst forth, "we must be up and doing; every nerve must be strained to heal the wound this deadly weapon and our own miserable credulity commingled have inflicted upon this noble and most injured lady."

"Herbert, let me but live to see *her* righted, and this demon's fame blasted, then if Neville's bullet do but reach home, the earth will be disencumbered of a villain."

"Stratford, hush! Enough of guilt, God knows, lies at our door. A hostile meeting is out of the question; your ward innocent, this man's guilt shows less heinous. With what authority was this woman vested?"

"All authority; she gave me to understand



she should chiefly reside with my ward.' The night before I left England I appealed to her in behalf of—of—" It seemed as if he *could not* pronounce the name of his betrothed—an anguished groan supplied the place. "I thought she heard me with coldness; I redoubled my earnestness—my prayers—I knelt at her feet, I adjured her by every womanly feeling, by that love, the strongest and tenderest implanted in the human breast, even by the holy instinct of a mother's love, to reverence the trust confided to her."

"Bootless petition in her case. Her child is only dear to her as she may further her ambition; that received a death-blow by the sudden passion of Sir Arthur Graham for your ward."

"Indeed! I never knew this."

"Perhaps not; Mdlle. de Maloé's delicacy would quite possibly have shrunk from the mention, even to you, of a rejected suitor, but I had it from his own lips when we met abroad; she would never have been placed in the position implied by this rejection had your engagement been more generally known."

"And yet it was to spare *her* delicacy, Herbert, that the fact was not in every babbler's mouth, and to show her that I had no doubts, even as I would hold no control over her affections but as she vouchsafed to accord it me."

"'Twas a false refinement, dear Stratford, a dangerous experiment; that too, I remember, was at the friendly suggestion of her ladyship. As the affianced wife of one of the first noblemen of the day she had been secure from every danger; doubly orphaned as she was, utterly alone in the world's wide wilderness, her moral safety had been far more certainly ensured by your acknowledged right of protection, and this Lady Graham knew, far better than you or her poor victim."

"Ah, Herbert! but for that fatal clause in her father's will she had long since been all my own."

"It was indeed a fatal clause; wedded ere time was given her to plunge into this maëstrom of dissipation, how changed had been the current of your lives; on the fair tablet of her ingenuous soul you had then inscribed the rules of a more careful conduct. But no more of this, she must not be thus tamely sacrificed. What are your plans?"

"I have none; and am utterly incapable of forming any; for, God help me! I have been blundering in strange darkness. I am conscious only of a burning, an insatiable thirst to meet this demon-woman, this incarnate fiend. Each moment seems an eternity till then. At what hour does the express start?"

"At 8, I think," and Malgrove almost tore the time-table asunder in the desperation of his haste. "Yes, at 8.10. In two hours then we start, for we have worn the night through. I will see that the horses are round to the minute ; but will you meanwhile try to rest, you are in no condition to travel."

Castleton wrung his friend's hand, and oh ! the look of love, gratitude, and devotion he cast upon him as he quitted the room.

And Castleton is alone—alone with his happiness—his boundless happiness.

With an abandonment of joy that had something frantic in it he flung himself on his knees. "And what," he almost shouted, "if she be innocent—Malgrove right, and I abused ! What if she be indeed the pure, though it may be erring, being I once believed her. All righteous Providence, what unspeakable rapture in the thought !"

And *if* Florence de Malcé were innocent—why then Lord Castleton stood confessed to the world, to Herbert Malgrove, to himself, the cold and heartless deserter of his all-but. wedded wife, and the assassin of her honour. But what were all this so that her fair brow might still wear the broad untarnished impress of innocence ?

The one sepulchral shadow darkening his soul had been the conviction of her disloyalty ; this

removed, welcome death in any form ; death and disgrace to him. "Let all of ignominy light upon me—deservedly light upon me—so she be saved," was his prayer.

"And can it be that there breathes the wretch who would peril her own soul to compass the ruin of a young and tender girl solemnly confided to her charge ? Oh God ! that she were a man, that I might wring retribution from her base soul."

Hurrying from one extreme to the other, he now beheld in Lady Graham only a spirit of evil, whom the foul fiend might blush to own his proselyte, and in his ward a being whose purity (if he were to retain his senses) he might no longer dare to question. And now pride slept, and love once more resumed its sway ; the memory of her offences forgotten, *he* became the criminal, *she* the victim ; her soul freed from the grosser stain, all else weighed light indeed in the balance ; and now, too, the naked undisguised truth stood plainly confessed ; he loved her still—fondly, passionately loved her, had never ceased to love her ; he knew and felt now how poor had been the cheat by which he had sought to persuade himself it were ever otherwise.

When Malgrove returned, Castleton was sunk in heavy slumber. By the imperfect light glim-

mering through the half-drawn curtains he gazed upon the worn but noble features of the sleeper, on which the lapse of a few weeks had worked the devastation of years, but their forced and rigid expression had given way, and as he continued his watch the shadow of a smile played round the perfect mouth so lately wreathed in haughty and defiant scorn. "He is dreaming once more of his betrothed," he murmured; "I will not awaken him, we have still another quarter of an hour to spare."

And that quarter of an hour—how was it employed? Oh, heart of gold! She must needs have been blind and wayward who had so coldly responded to its throbbings.

Herbert stands beside the bent figure of a gray-headed man, his hand rests on his shoulder. "The log shall yet blaze on the hearth of the old hall, Stanton, and the joy-bells ring out their merriest peal. Tell them, tell them all, we go in search of happiness, and, God helping, we shall bring it back with us."

If the wealth of Christendom had been laid at the feet of that old man as an alternative he had only answered, as he did, by suffocating sobs.

## CHAPTER XXI.

Back do I toss these treasons to thy head ;  
With the hell-hated lie o'erwhelm thy heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Howe'er thou art a fiend,  
A woman's shape doth shield thee.

KING LEAR.

It was yet early for the world of fashion when the two friends reached Brook Street, but Lady Graham was not a mere fashionist, and had left her room several hours. With vices which were her disgrace there were yet the elements of a higher nature in her than constitutes that thing of prate and folly. Energetic and bold, bending all to her indomitable and masculine will, she might have swayed an empire, but had hardly graced a home where children's voices hailed her "mother."

Her ladyship was in her dressing-room, balancing her accounts, when the cards of both gentlemen were handed to her. She read the name on each.

"Go, I will ring," and not a muscle of those marble features stirred till the door was closed ; yet in the name of Herbert Malgrove she read at once her doom, the death-blow to the wild and daring hopes she had indulged. She had

played her last card and lost the game, and she *knew it*.

"*He* returned!" she soliloquized, as she wiped the cold dew from her brow, "and at this juncture! Well then, all is over; with a gambler's recklessness I have staked all upon this throw, and have lost all. To struggle further were insanity; that man doubted and despised me from the hour we met, intuitively I felt it," and her ladyship ground her white teeth, "and his power over Castleton has in it something incomprehensible. That haughty will, that lofty and inexorable spirit which bows to none other, yields with a child's submission to the nod of this audacious priest, my evil spirit ever! How dare he meddle between him and me? by what right, what title?—poor, dependent, obscure!—how dare he?"

But impotent were her ladyship's ravings! vain all further struggles! And she knew them to be so. The audacious priest was here, under her own roof; and with what purpose? a righteous one, or he had not been engaged in it. At last her heart turned coward, her spirit quailed, she fought against her doom in vain. "They are here to force me to recant what I have said, I will not do it, in that at least I can foil them; I will not see them." A look of baffled malice, of ghastly despair distorted the features. She seized a pen, wrote a hurried line

or two; then with an effort, of which Lady Graham alone had been capable, controlled her agitation, and ringing, desired the man to give the note to the Earl of Castleton.

Meanwhile his lordship crossed and re-crossed the room with impatient strides, his lips rigidly compressed and his eyeballs literally glaring round from time to time at the door.

"She will not meet us, Stratford."

"You think not."

"I think not."

"But she shall! Herbert, she shall!" and his lordship spoke through his clenched teeth with a hissing sound.

"You cannot *force* yourself into her presence, she is a woman."

"And is my stupendous wrong to go un-avenged because she is a woman? Oh, God! that she were indeed a man that we might meet at the sword's point! oh, hell-kite!"

"Hush, Stratford! with such unhallowed thoughts, bless God that she bears a woman's shape and be content."

"Content! content! and you can speak to me of content and name this demon in the same breath. Just Heaven! is she to go forth unscathed while her victims expire on the rack! Is my bride to be proclaimed a wanton, and she to stalk the earth an unbranded murderer?"



"Nay, leave her to herself, that worst of hells to the guilty. The poisoned chalice will yet return to her own lips, she has herself prepared the libation."

A groan, as of one in anguish, here distinctly met the ear of Malgrove; he had before fancied he heard sighs proceeding from the room communicating with the one in which they sat by folding doors, but before he could speak a servant entered with her ladyship's missive. She had pleaded illness as her excuse for declining the interview, she was unable to leave her bed. Castleton tossed the note to Malgrove.

"And does she," he again burst forth, "deem my vengeance so puny a thing that——"

"Be patient, Stratford. Leave vengeance to——"

But wildly Castleton interrupted him.

"To what, to whom? Cease, Herbert! what vengeance, however appalling, can be commensurate with my great wrongs, what bolt of wrath were too hot, too deadly?" He raised his clasped hands: "Hear me righteous heaven! may curses deep as——"

But ere the awful malediction vibrating on his lips was breathed, a firm yet gentle grasp was on his arm, a sob rung in his ear: "Oh do not, do not curse my mother, Lord Castleton; for sweet mercy's sake do not curse her!"

He turned in mute astonishment at this appeal. It was indeed the child of her whom he had been about so fearfully to denounce who stood or rather crouched beside him, sweet Ellen Graham ; her young fair form bent in humblest suppliance, her head pressed between her small pale hands as if to hide its shame.

For a single moment Castleton gazed fiercely upon her, in the next turned coldly and silently away. Bitter hate against the mother was raging too wildly within ; she was a Graham, *her* child ; and he was yet writhing beneath the torture that mother had inflicted. How different under other circumstances he had acted. What a wreck will passion make of the human mind ! But not long was that fair child suffered to remain in unsympathized distress. Malgrove raised, and drew her gently towards him. She looked timidly in his face, scanned it thoughtfully, then buried her head in his bosom and sobbed as if her heart were breaking. She was in very truth a child, so pure, so guileless ! His lordship was more moved than he had perhaps cared to acknowledge. At another time he might have noted the fact that all—the young, the old, the innocent, and the guilty alike turned to Malgrove in their hour of sorrow and suffering, turned to him for sympathy, for

help, for consolation. And how few went empty away.

"You do not know, Ellen," said his lordship, when the poor girl was somewhat calmed by Herbert's gentle lovingness—"you do not know the hideous cause."

"Ah yes! ah yes!" she interposed, "I do know, oh too well I know! And she will die—she will die! She so good, so loving, and so true; she will die!"

"Who will die?" asked Malgrove bending tenderly over the speaker, divining, Jesuit as he was, the one referred to, but not unwilling that his friend should learn what impression his ward had been made upon this simple child of nature. The young are not the worst judges of character.

"Florence de Malcé, the best, the dearest, the only one in the wide world that loves me."

"And you love her, Ellen."

She clasped her hands together. "Ah if I could only tell you how much, Mr. Malgrove, for you are he, I am sure. I was so lonely after poor papa's death, oh so very desolate; not so much as a bird or a dog to pet and fondle, at last——" she paused.

"Go on, go on, sweet Ellen!" urged Herbert.

"At last a happy time came. I saw Florence de Malcé, and all was changed like the last scene

of a fairy tale. It was enough for me to sit at her feet and gaze upon her glorious beauty, and listen to the music of her voice ; her joyous laugh too, I had never heard such melody. She was like nothing but sunshine ; I used to call her my sunbeam. She changed sadly after Lord Castleton went away, and then I cheered *her* and she called me *her* sunbeam, and now, now I have lost her."

As Ellen thus ran on with all a girl's enthusiasm for a favourite friend, Castleton looked inclined to kneel at her feet, he held both her hands within his own raining down kisses upon them.

"You do not then believe Mdlle. de Malcé so erring as the world would make it appear ?" said the audacious priest.

"The world ! the world does not condemn her, Mr. Malgrove, she is beloved and adored by all. The world has not abandoned her, 'tis she has given up the world. Oh none but Lord Castleton could have the heart to desert Florence de Malcé !"

"You are young to give judgment in such a case," said Castleton, "but yet I thank you, and more, sweet one, believe you. I might perhaps plead something in extenuation of an act you stigmatize as 'desertion' by reminding you, Ellen, of her by whose perfidy I was wrought upon to commit that act of madness,

and let it still be some poor atonement to you to know that if the pouring out of my heart's blood could win for me the pardon of your sweet friend, it should be drained to the last drop. Go, child ! go tell your mother this, I would add yet something more to this commission for her own especial reading but that——”

“ But that Lord Castleton will not,” interposed Ellen very gently but sadly ; “ Lord Castleton will not say of a mother that which her child ought not to hear.”

His lordship coldly bowed.

“ But why, Mr. Malgrove, does Lord Castleton make question of the forgiveness of Florence if he but condescend to ask it?—she whose angel sweetness no harshness could provoke to the utterance of one ungentle word. Oh, I have seen her bear so much, with such unvarying patience. Or if he still doubt her, seek further of one who has been her constant companion till quite lately that she was taken ill. Ask her what has been her daily life, her deeds of mercy, her more than generosity, her munificence ; whatever she may have done Mrs. Stewart will not deceive you now. You owe this to her as your ward, Lord Castleton, though you have cast her off as your wife.”

Castleton flushed to the very brows. Humbled indeed was the proud noble when he might not *gainsay* the taunt of this simple girl.

"No, Ellen," he returned, "I have no doubts—none, Heaven knows, and therefore shall not your friend be further outraged by an indelicate and bootless inquiry."

"You are wrong, Stratford, and she is right, her young wisdom teaches us a lesson, it is an act of justice due to your ward. But this person, Ellen, who has resided with Mdlle. de Malcé—this Mrs. Stewart, she has betrayed her lady, has she not?"

Ellen's fair head drooped upon her bosom, and painful blushes dyed her cheek—she was silent, too.

Malgrove exchanged a hurried glance with Castleton.

"By whom was she recommended to Mdlle. de Malcé's notice?"

"I—I do not know."

"Forgive me, I am most discourteous, but perhaps you had rather not know."

"I had rather not answer," she returned, ingenuously, "but for Mrs. Stewart she would gladly atone—the guilt lies heavy at her heart—she was once good and true, but she so loved her child."

Again the friends exchanged glances.

"What is the guilt that lies so heavy at her heart, Ellen?"

"Oh, ask her, ask her! It is so painful to me to tell, yet Lord Castleton should know."

A servant entered—"Her ladyship desires to see you immediately, Miss Graham."

"Tell my mother I am at present engaged with Lord Castleton," and as she spoke her slight girlish figure assumed the bearing of womanhood, with something of its pride; there was, too, for the moment, a haughty if not a defiant look, which reminded you strangely of the mother. That look told a piteous tale—a tale of unnatural harshness, ere a nature so pliant and loving had been forced into such bitter reprisals.

As the door closed after the servant, she sighed heavily, and her arms sunk despondingly by her side. Both gentlemen rose.

"Nay, do not go. I seldom see my mother."

"Then, see her now," said Malgrove, in a tone of gentle entreaty.

She returned his gaze with one of deep meaning.

"Ah," she replied, blushing, and shaking her little head, "rebellion has earned me small happiness. I sometimes wish I had been content to remain the simple child she would have had me. I do think my heart will break, and oh, how I wish it would! Farewell, dear Mr. Malgrove! God speed you, Lord Castleton!" and she was gone.

## CHAPTER XXII.

Hie thee to the lady of my love, report what thou hast seen.

"THIS Mrs. Stewart, it is clear, has been placed as a spy over your ward, Castleton," said Malgrove, as they entered the library in Park Lane, "some deep mystery is involved in her strange disappearance just at this juncture, but you will seek her out."

"To what end, unless it be to show me my own insane folly in a yet insaner point of view. It suffices — I have been the dupe, the besotted, miserable dupe of this fearful woman. Her deep-laid, daring scheme has lost me my bride, my more than ever idolized love!"

"This is indeed insane. Castleton, my beloved friend, throw off this armour of pride, the besetting sin of your otherwise noble nature—trust all to her tenderness, and doubt not the issue."

"Herbert, you would not ask why I am content to sue rather for pardon than the recovery of her love, could I paint to you what no mortal tongue could do, the scorn, the savage scorn with which that love has been repudiated. Oh, the haunting memory of that last interview! Were I to live over ten lives, and each one were



steeped to the chin in misery, that single night would stand out alone in its unequalled sum of agony. Had you but seen her, Herbert, heard the sweet earnestness of her appeal, beheld her gentle patience, her deep humility, her innocent trust! When all else had failed, she besought me by our mutual love, by our oath of affiance, by the hallowed memory of her dead father; she knelt to me—knelt in all the despairing agony of a broken spirit—and would you credit it?—would you believe, Herbert, if other lips than mine revealed it?—that even as she clung to me then, I flung her from me—hurled at her the deadly slander, the accursed, hideous lie that woman taught me to believe a truth.

“No, urge me no more upon a point on which even you must see there were at best but doubtful chance of success. The deepest insult a modest woman can receive, has been offered by him from whom it should last have come. Her pardon I may ask, but have I a right to probe her further?

“Never while life and memory are left me shall I forget the tender, beseeching eloquence of that pale, anguished face—and then the change. Oh, God! the change to the fixed and stony gaze of a statue—the leaden look of dull despair when she at last comprehended me—comprehended that I, her betrothed husband, denounced *her as a wanton*. Nay, 'tis too fearful!

"I think, now," Castleton continued, after a brief pause, "I shall always think either that humanity, mere bald humanity, was crushed from out my being, or that my senses wandered. No man, no sane man, beholding her as I did, a suppliant at my feet, though never so guilt-stained, had acted as I did. No ; there are some wrongs, and this is one, for which no atonement being possible, there is no pardon, at least not of that nature which leaves a hope of reconciliation ; for pardon is not necessarily reconciliation, the reunion of sundered hearts—believe it not, my friend."

"I know not what to believe or what to think, Castleton,—must I own you disappoint me ? Her pardon you may ask, you say, but have no right to probe her further. If the cold finger of suspicion has left one stain within your breast (for it is the bitterest drop of all in the cup of wedded life), why then, indeed, you have lost the right to woo her once more to that breast."

"You are wide of the mark, Herbert, but—" and his lordship grasped a costly crystal cup that stood on the marble console against which he leaned. "Were I to shatter this cup to atoms could the utmost skill of the artisan restore it, think you, to its pristine beauty ?"

"I conceive not, but I am too dull to catch your meaning."

"I mean, then, that in the shock my lost darling has sustained, her love and confidence have been too rudely shaken to be again revived. Strain the golden chords of the harp too tightly, and the invisible soul of its harmony no longer gives out the same sweet melody."

"Stratford, nor love nor confidence are destroyed, you acted under a misconception—your own honour imperiously demands that atonement be made. Throw yourself at the feet of her you have wronged, rise not till she bids you, your probation will be brief, or I am strangely deceived. If you have stolen the light from her eye, the colour from her cheek, the music from her soul, you owe her this submission, and a life-tide of loving tenderness beside."

"Say rather, a life-tide of penitence—but it cannot be."

"You mean, then, to say that you will not stoop to win back the lost love of your erewhile affianced bride?"

"Hear me, and I do beseech you, Herbert, without misapprehension. To win back one smile of love, one gleam of tenderness, one token of confidence from my ill-used darling, I would bend that pride, if aught were left me, to humblest servitude, could I do so with honour."

"Why, what miserable sophistry is this? your honour stands most impugned under this

reserve. If you would kneel thus humbly at her feet for pardon of a most bitter wrong, why this holding back?"

"Because I will not set the seal upon my own meanness as well as insolence. Granting it possible, after such an affront, for her heart to plead in my behalf, could her reason, her own honourable pride in herself, yield more than forgiveness?"

"Ah, pride again! Stratford, if the heart plead in your behoof, nor reason nor pride will long hold the mastery—besides, though your ward has been bitterly wronged, it may not be denied that she has greatly erred."

"Ay," returned his lordship, after a pause, as if half-reluctant now to concede even thus much, "but 'tis all as nothing to the deeper guilt I had madly dreamed of. No, I have lost her, I know it—yet am I, nevertheless, in a strange bewilderment of happiness; I can give it no utterance, but happiness it is, deep, inextinguishable happiness."

It was a beautiful smile—a smile an angel might have worn, that played over the fine features of Herbert at this avowal—the inflexible virtue of his friend once satisfied, he knew that the rich argosy of love would in due time weigh anchor at its destined port. Castleton saw that smile, and once more their hands met in the warm pressure of devoted friendship.

"And now, Herbert, you must to La Grade."

Malgrove started. "I! for what purpose?" and every thought merged in the bliss of recovered confidence. .

Castleton failed to note the sudden pallor and the altered voice of his companion.

"Yes; see her—say what you will, but do not suffer her to suppose I presume to hope."

"But why depute another in so delicate a matter?"

"It is just because it is so delicate a matter that I depute my friend. I dare not stand before her until some atonement has been offered—nay, do me justice, you taxed me but now with pride—verily, that pride has been shaken to its foundation, for has not that confidence in my own righteous judgment most signally failed, the dupe, the idiot-dupe of this audacious fraud? It had been my pride, too, to think that she whom I wedded should be stainless as the breath of heaven; and she is—yes, she is—yet is her name coupled with a thousand follies, upon the mocking lips of half the world, the world *she* lived in. No, trust me, there has been more than enough to scare away the pride of a whole race of Castletons."

"Thank God!" fervently ejaculated Herbert, "for truly there is enough in the last representative to suffice for a score."

And in another hour he was on his way to La Garde, with what feelings may be imagined, when it is remembered that Lady Constance was the companion of Florence.

He should, then, yet once again behold that fair being who was still, alas ! so fatally dear to him ; and how meet her, how school his heart to even the semblance of indifference in her presence ? In vain he set before him the mission of Stratford, in vain bethought him of the stake for which he ventured, for on his success or failure now hung the happiness or misery of an idolized friend—the vision of Constance came back, as if in mocking defiance of his better will.

Mdlle. de Malcé had been represented in delicate health ; he ought then to be announced to her friend ; well, she would acquit him of all design to intrude upon her ; she would know, must know, that he had no motive, could, alas ! have none, connected with herself in seeking her ; their mutual aim was to reunite two beings tenderly attached to each other. Her presence at the château was the accident, his visit there at the pressing instance, and in the immediate service, of his friend.

It was mid-day when Herbert alighted at the park gates of this ancient seat of the De Malcés. Controlling, by a powerful effort, all outward

emotion, he inquired for Lady Constance Greville.

"Her ladyship left here for Boulogne early this morning, monseigneur."

How simple and concise these words, yet they fell with the weight of molten lead upon the throbbing heart of Malgrove. Till this moment he did not realize how completely he had deceived himself in thinking he would fain shun a meeting with her he so loved. Amidst all the pain, the agitation attendant upon it, joy, deep, unspeakable joy, had been uppermost. It would seem as if it were the doom, the inexorable doom, of some beings to make the happiness of others; to know none, but as reflected through that happiness themselves.

The man's information that his lady was at home was twice repeated before Malgrove could collect his thoughts sufficiently to say, that, "if Mdlle. de Malcé would do him the honour to receive him, in an hour he would return." Alas! he needed that hour to discipline his heart.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

But no reproach escaped his tongue,  
As o'er her gentle form he hung,  
And sought to soothe her deep distress,  
With all a brother's tenderness.

AND Malgrove's purposed visit—how did it affect the fair mistress of La Garde? Had he returned from his exile to seek her in the deep of her sorrow? it was like him; or was he there in the name of his friend to justify that friend's desertion of her, and soothe her into compliance with his lordly resolve, that the coronet of the illustrious house of Castleton should never shadow the brow of a De Malcé? or had he come (and with one wild throb the pulses of her heart came to a dead stop), had he come to break to her the intelligence that her so lately betrothed husband was about to wed with another?

If that last thought shook almost to annihilation that worn and delicate frame, it at least nerved her soul with strength to call up the poor remnant of pride left her, to conceal the anguish which such revelation must call forth.

And how meet Herbert Malgrove, the good, the true, the noble? or rather, how would he meet her? Why, in all pitying love and tenderness, or he had not been there. But did he



know how weak, how more than weak, how iniquitous her conduct had been? how, abusing the trust solemnly reposed in her, she had stained her name and race by her countless follies, and flung disgrace upon the high and unsullied name of her affianced husband? "And if he does not know all this, he will read the tale in this guilt-stricken face," she mournfully exclaimed, throwing back the masses of gold from her pallid brow, and gazing into the mirror with an aspect of terror, as if, like the mark on the brow of the first murderer, she expected to behold the shadow of her offences graven there. But whatever the reflection that fair young face revealed, it had at least no calming effect; shudderingly she turned away, and kneeling beside the couch, buried her head in the cushions and wept long and passionately.

Within the hour Malgrove returned. With feeble steps the poor girl advanced to meet him, but the room seemed to swim round with her; she stopped abruptly, a low but stifled moan escaped her, and Malgrove hurrying forward, received her almost senseless form in his arms.

"Merciful powers! was this in very truth the being whom Castleton had cast from him as a thing of frailty? that girlish and shrinking form on which such deep humility was painted, that sweet but woe-worn face, over which a thousand

blushing shames were flitting? Oh, guilt never yet enshrined itself in such a guise as that!" was the thought of Herbert. Intense feeling for her, passionate devotion to his friend, made him keen-sighted; in that one glance she turned upon him, as her eyes imploringly met his, in the instant veiling of that anguished face from his scrutiny, he read alike her errors and their atonement.

Stern indeed must have been the moralist who had refused to take her to his bosom in pitying pardon.

Her pale, tiny hands were crossed upon her bosom, it might be to still its beatings, it might be in conscious shame, and the fair head was turned away in voiceless woe.

Malgrove supported her to the couch, he bent low—lower still, till his knee touched the ground—the heart's spontaneous homage at the sight of so much sorrow.

"Sweet lady! you will not deem this visit an intrusion; I was once honoured with your friendship, say I am not unwelcome."

Tears and heavy sighs impeded the utterance of a syllable in reply; but a smile, oh, so wan and faint! played for a moment round the cherub mouth; and as words of tenderness, of earnest, faithful tenderness, fell thick and fast from Herbert's lips, words involving not a sha-

dow of reproach, she seemed to lose in the glad surprise all self-control, and sobbed as though in very truth that gentle heart must break, must burst.

"Oh, Mr. Malgrove!" she at last exclaimed in piteous accents, "if you would not see me die at your feet, be less kind, less merciful! kill me, oh, kill me! but not with such loving words!"

"And wherefore, dear—" "Mdlle. de Malcé," he was about to say, but even that seemed all too harsh for one so utterly spirit-broken, and he changed it to "sweet Florence!"

With a faint cry she hid her face in his bosom, and Malgrove held her there as he would a little child, till he had soothed her into calmness.

Ay, Castleton, the haughty Earl of Castleton, might have learned a deep lesson from that scene, so sad, so touching, we had almost said so holy. Even he in his stern pride must perforce have wept, though under the impression of her guilt, and bowed before that sweet and solemn truth, that "virtue pardons those she would amend."

The purer, holier nature of Herbert Malgrove forgave her whom *he* had spurned and abandoned.

True, Lord Castleton had believed in her apostasy, while Herbert had from the first as

persistently repudiated such belief, but anyway he had never turned from the being he had once religiously pledged himself to cherish and protect; now, wronged, oppressed, and forsaken, he had only tender compassion, profound and pitying love, to give, and these he did give in measureless abundance.

Amidst a world of sighs, the penitent recounted much that had transpired during his absence from England. It was indeed a relation replete with folly; the wildest imprudence, the most reckless improvidence, were palpable to her hearer's sense; her incaution, but for her youth and inexperience, had exceeded human credence; and yet, though not the faintest shadow of a reflection was cast upon any one, not a doubt remained upon Herbert's mind that she had, from first to last, been far "more sinned against than sinning."

As the name of Lady Graham escaped her, the pale cheek grew a thought paler. With an acute sense of the many injuries she had sustained at her hands, she was obviously ignorant of the crowning one of her defamation to her guardian. Of him she did not venture to speak, although the flitting blush and quick gasping sigh told Herbert whenever she approached the ground his shadow crossed.

"And now," she said, as she concluded her

painful recital, "that you know the heavy, heavy sins that I have committed, can you still forgive me, still suffer me to call you friend? Oh! if you can, do not deny me the boon, for except Constance, dear Constance, I have none left to love me now."

"Deeply do you wrong one loving, loyal heart in so saying, dear lady. Yet hear me: I were no friend to deny that you have greatly erred—I would not that you thought lightly of it; but bitterly have you atoned. The future lies before you: oh, take heed—take good heed! Let not the past have been in vain!"

"The future!" she mournfully re-echoed; "alas! what a desolate future have I made it! But," she continued, with tearful, timid grace, "you have not answered me; you will not leave me to myself again—you will guide and counsel me—ah! say you will." And with the simple trust of a child she once more laid her throbbing temples on that faithful bosom. Nor was Herbert proof against her soft witchery. Smoothing back her hair with a touch as gentle as a woman's, and speaking in tones as low, he gazed down into the blue depths of those soft eyes; and, as he pictured them shining out upon Castleton with all the magic light of love, the thought that he had as yet gained nothing for that beloved friend nerved him to the task.

"Counsel, guidance"—these had been her words. "And would she, who might reign omnipotent over one noble heart—and not the world can furnish forth its equal—be content with these and these alone? Counsel is cold unwarmed by the breath of love. Would she, I ask, be content to ignore the tenderer link which love may bind, and rest satisfied with these chill and shadowy substitutes?"

Florence met the earnest, anxious gaze of Herbert with one of strange bewilderment, and remained silent. He bent down his head, and looked half reproachfully, though lovingly, in her face.

"Is, then, Stratford Castleton indeed forgotten, sweet one?"

The words were scarcely off his lips ere his eager listener started to her feet, an indignant flash lit up the before soft and dreamy eyes, and neck and face were dyed in one bright and scarlet blush.

"I had not thought," she said, "that any one would have ventured to breathe that name in my hearing."

"And has then that name, once so dear, become so hateful to you?"

"If it has not," she returned, in calmer, but yet colder and haughtier tones, "it is because hate is merged in deeper scorn!"

"Harsh words, lady, from lips so gentle; scorn of Stratford Castleton is the last feeling he could be supposed capable of inspiring. Sublime in every virtue that gives dignity to man, almost alone in his chivalrous sense of honour; loyal, loving, and true, scorn can scarcely, I deem, apply to him."

Impulsive as a child, and passionate, though of so warm and pliant a nature, Florence had, even in their utterance, repented her words; but at this deserved eulogium of him but lately so wildly worshipped, so deeply revered, her pride gave way, and she burst into tears.

"Forgive me, dear Mr. Malgrove, but you do not know—oh, indeed, indeed you cannot guess—how cruel he has been—oh, so cruel! I know I was unworthy, utterly unworthy, of his esteem—his—his love," she faltered, "but his rigid virtue might have been satisfied to rend asunder the chain that bound us, without the last deep and causeless insult. I cannot tell you—I may not speak such words—I should die in their utterance—I would I had—oh! I would I had died before I heard them!" she cried, wringing her hands. And it was very painful to look upon that fair, fragile girl, so entirely alone in her helplessness, traduced and outraged as she had been. "No, my lips may never reveal the

nature of that insult, and you, alas! can never know."

"I know all, all—Stratford's deep offence, and his excuse for that offence."

She shook her head, and through her slender fingers, that strove to hide her face from his compassionate gaze, the tears fell in large scalding drops.

"Nay, deign to hear it, and then deny him your forgiveness if it must indeed be so. I feel, acutely feel, for you, but cannot be indifferent to his far heavier suffering. You have been supported by conscious innocence; he, in having wounded that innocence, is without that balm. Yes, I know," he vehemently went on, "all the madness of his fatal error, his jealous, headlong rage; but say not, in mercy say not, that he has sinned past hope of pardon."

Surprised out of herself at sight of this strong emotion, Florence hurried her trembling hand in Herbert's.

"Dear, dear Mr. Malgrove, my forgiveness is his a hundred, oh! a thousand, times over, but"—and athwart the melody of her soft, low voice jarred a momentary bitterness—"he will not stoop to accept so poor a boon at my hands."

"Not stoop to accept the boon! not accept pardon at your hands! What mean you, lady? If he would not receive it as the most precious



gift Heaven has to bestow, wherefore am I here, in his name, to bend in lowliest suppliance at your feet, and pour out, so far as imperfect words may do, his soul's contrition, its yet deeper anguish for the cruel wrong done you?" and Herbert knelt before her, clasping both her hands beseechingly within his own.

Trembling, half fainting, Florence still strove to speak; scarcely could she believe but that it was all some wild delusion sent in mockery of her woes. But Herbert was there, at her feet—he would not deceive her.

"I knew not," she presently said, "that you came from him. Oh! bear him my willing pardon; 'twas but my pride that spoke those rash words. Ah! tell him"—and the hands but just released were clasped despairingly together—"tell him, all cruel as he was, that he has long since been forgiven; for here—here in this breaking heart—I feel he has been."

"Dear, noble, generous girl! he asks no more; or if I grow bold and plead for something beyond, think my presumption speaks, not his; yet, having out of the depths of your sweet and womanly nature accorded so much to my supplications, let me not, I do conjure you, depart without a hope that he may be permitted to plead his own cause. Lady, a human heart

lies prostrate at your feet, and well I know you will not spurn it!"

There were few who could at any time resist the singular charm of Herbert's manner, and now that his whole soul looked out from those earnest eyes, aided by the deep, rich tones of his voice, no marvel it found an answering echo in the heart of his still agitated auditress. There was, nevertheless, less of inexperience, less of the girl, both in the manner and matter of her reply than had been hitherto apparent.

"You shall decide for me; yet to what will this interview tend? Heaven knows how freely I forgive all his cruel thoughts of me, but I see not how more can well be conceded. Only hard hate, withering contempt, and inflexible pride spoke in word and glance when last we met. I am not less guilty now than then; his compassion may be enlisted in my behalf; his judgment must still as ever condemn me. Why, then, recall the past?"

"Lady, the past must be recalled; talk not of 'scorn,' of 'inflexible pride,'" and Herbert spoke with passionate fervour, "he loves you with an idolatry which no tame words of mine may venture to portray; proportioned to that love was his agony, his madness—oh! it was madness, doubt it not, doubt it not—when he

learned from the lips of truth, as he then conceived, that you were unworthy that love."

"Alas, alas!" she exclaimed, "that it should have been the truth. I was indeed unworthy either esteem or love."

"Never so little so as when thinking thus; but 'tis plain your very guilelessness deceives you. Now, mark me!" and the words came slowly forth, with a sad and significant pathos, and were fraught with a solemn meaning,—  
"there are some acts to which we give the general name of folly—others to which we can affix none but that of guilt. Heed well the distinction—*that of guilt*. Castleton learned, then, that you were *unworthy the esteem, the reverence of all honourable men—all virtuous women!* Am I understood?"

He was indeed! no need to ask the question. Those pale, pale lips had already answered him. Not drops from the famed upas could have distilled more deadly poison than did those ghastly words falling drop by drop upon her heart, blighting its youth and purity. She held her very breath as one by one she gauged their dread interpretation. She kept her hands tightly pressed over her heaving bosom as if to press down the weight of woe which else must crush, must kill her. Once before, and from him, from Stratford, had she heard such words—

the same in import, but how different in their mode of revelation, for no amount of human frailty could have provoked from Herbert language such as *his* severity had dealt out to this heart-broken girl.

For the first time Herbert repented him of the task he had undertaken,—he would probe the wound no farther. Not even on behalf of his friend would he add one other pang to the measure of that poor child's cup of woe. Verily, it was full to overflowing. No votary of crime could have worn such a look as that which now met his pitying gaze, so helpless, so hopeless! yet amid its excess of anguish so full of innocence, of simplicity, and trust.

"Oh, Mr. Malgrove, who could have had the heart to tell him this? and how could *he*—ah, how could he believe it?"

"Who could have had the heart to tell him him this? Nay, Florence de Malcé must reflect whether she had not some enemy at court?"

Mournfully she shook her head. "The greatest enemy of poor Florence de Malcé was, as I fancy, Florence de Malcé herself," and a smile for a passing second dimpled the sweet mouth, and then gave place to a quivering sigh, but the smile was the sadder symbol of the twain.

"Can you fix on none other?"

"Indeed, none ; among those with whom I was, alas ! too familiar, many were erring and thoughtless ;—you shake your head ; well, very faulty, yet far less so than myself ; and little as I deserved it, I do think, indeed I do, that they loved me."

"Who could help it ?" exclaimed Herbert, a captive to her sweet and trusting nature. "But apart from these gay associates—in the ranks of the accredited good and discreet, did you suspect none of being inimical to you ?"

Again she shook her head. "Indeed none."

"Not her under whose protection you were more immediately placed when Stratford left you ?"

"Did *she* tell him this ruthless tale ?"

"Even so."

"Then he would believe her ; he revered none so much, trusted none so highly. God help me, Mr. Malgrove, if my fate lay in her hands. She never loved me ; from the first I felt this ; her cold, glittering eye paralyzed the little good within. In vain I sought to soften or avoid it, it seemed gifted with the fabled fascination of the serpent's. Yet erring, guilty, as I had been, on what could she found a tale so monstrous ?"

"Nay, 'twas less difficult than you imagine. There was unhappily a substratum of truth

on which to erect her edifice. Forgive me for probing a yet unhealed wound, but did you not, on one occasion, at a late hour of the night, leave the opera-house in company with Sir Harcourt Neville, alone—alone?”

“I did,” she replied, with a subdued and even embarrassed air. “Ah, Mr. Malgrove, I could never tell how it happened that I missed Lady Graham that night. Sir Harcourt proposed his carriage, for her ladyship, believing me under the protection of some friends, had returned at once in mine.”

“Could her ladyship think the protection of this person a fitting one for you—alone, at such an hour?”

“I believe Sir Harcourt felt this,” she returned, eagerly; “for he almost immediately quitted the carriage; and I returned alone.”

“How? You returned alone?”

“Yes; he saw what I could not conceal from him—my extreme distress. His leaving me was meant in kindness, indeed it was.”

“Brave gentleman! it *was* kindness. Poor child! poor child! you have been hardly dealt with. But now tell me how it happened that you were in such close conference with this party at the masked ball—was it quite right?”

“To go to a masked ball? No, very wrong;

and I should not have gone *but* to meet Sir Harcourt."

"*But* to meet him ! and was that right ?"

"Indeed, yes ; I was heavily in his debt, and he would not heed my prayers for the discharge of the debt—a gambling one, the most disgraceful of all ; and I knew that if I saw him I could convince him that, in very kindness to me, he must no longer refuse its liquidation ; and I did convince him when at last we met. Ah, I cannot tell you how generous, how disinterested he was."

It was clear to Herbert's sense that her very innocence had saved her from a full comprehension of the insult of the baronet, couched under his supplication to her to take refuge in his arms from the troubles that beset her. She had never dreamed that his offer implied anything inimical to virtue.

"I had just succeeded," she continued, "in pressing the notes upon him, at the moment I beheld——" She suddenly paused, or if she pronounced Stratford's name it was inaudible, but the vivid blush, the gasping sigh betrayed her. "The shock, the shame, and something, amidst all, of gladness at sight of him, overpowered me—at least, the look he bent on me did ; its recollection haunts me to this hour. I must have become insensible,

yet I think only for a moment, but when I recovered, even in that moment, he was gone."

"Ay, lady, it was time to fly a scene so confirmatory of all he had heard." Then in a lower, but not less impressive tone—"Sir Harcourt's arms encircled you, you reclined upon his breast, your breath fanned his cheek——"

But with a sharp, wild cry she stopped him. "Oh, no, no! Do not, do not say so, in mercy do not!" Then, in a subdued and despairing accent: "Oh if it were indeed so, he is more than justified in his desertion, and all is indeed over for ever! for ever!"

Herbert noted the words, though he was too delicate to let her see that he had done so. "Forgive me for having inflicted this pain, though I can scarcely forgive myself, but 'twere fit you know the grounds of Stratford's conduct, which in its results has so fatally wrecked the peace of the best and noblest of men, nor has, I apprehend, left quite unscathed that of his affianced bride."

Pressing back with her slender fingers the scalding tears, she besought this tried friend to decide for her. "It is for me rather than Stratford to plead for forgiveness. Say to him what you will."

"Then I will bid him come and receive his pardon from those kind lips." And if Herbert



interpreted smiles and blushes as assent, it may be opined that he was not much mistaken.

"And Lady Graham," she said, after a pause. "I must forgive her, too ; the atonement was at least generous."

"Atonement ! I have heard of none on the part of her ladyship. I doubt if she will be guilty of so amiable a weakness."

"How, then," inquired the bewildered girl, "was my guardian disabused ?"

"By the convictions of his own noble nature, after due reflection. He only doubted your truth when reason was dethroned—passion lays waste that fair domain, Florence. But this is past, onward let us look. Trust me his confidence is boundless as his love—his remorse, a thing too deep, too sacred, for me to dare to touch upon ; those glistening eyes tell me more eloquently than words, that you feel it to be so—and now, what will that gentle heart vouchsafe to one who so loves you, Florence ?"

Only a moment she looked into his face, and then tears and smiles and blushes were hidden in his bosom, while in a voice so tremulous, he held his breath to catch the words, she murmured, "Ask him to forgive me—and oh, if he *can*, to love me once more."

Need we say how eloquently she was thanked and blessed ? And now Herbert was gone—

gone, but had left, as he always did, a luminous track behind him.

"My mission is accomplished," was his exclamation, as he turned from the gates of La Garde. Lifting his eyes to the broad, unclouded vault of heaven, he reverently uncovered: "My God, I thank Thee that she is not unworthy of him!"

Noble heart! brave spirit! Why, oh why wert thou alone doomed to a joyless and solitary existence? why must no responsive chord vibrate to thy heart's deep throbs? why must woman's love, a gift almost divine, accorded to the meanest groveller on earth, be denied to thee alone? Why? alas! Echo alone gave back an answering "Why?"

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

So young, my lord, and true.

LEAR.

MEANWHILE Lady Constance, summoned to Beechgrove by the sudden, but scarcely unexpected illness of her kinswoman, Mrs. Morton, arrived not in time to see her alive—but her end, like her life, had been calm and painless. Constance, who had been much attached to her, tried not to blame herself for having left her.

Anxiety for Florence in her solitary home decided her to return so soon as the last tribute of respect had been paid to the memory of her departed friend.

There was one duty, however, for such she deemed it, that Constance resolved on before she again looked upon the fair anguished face of the mourner, now become so precious to her. She would see Lord Castleton; see, and fearlessly denounce him as a traitor to his vows, as one who more than all the rest of the world had wronged her whom most he was bound to cherish and protect, for far more than by all her numberless transgressions had she been injured in the eyes of the world by his heartless desertion of her.

"Was it for him," she asked herself, "who by humble suppliance had won her love in the first gushing tide of its young tenderness, to be the first to point the scorn of an unfeeling world towards a defenceless girl?" Her destiny was in his hands—to decide for weal or woe. And, inexorable as doom, he did decide it, he turned away from her—and if the world had done the same, it had been justified by his act. Lord Castleton was their precedent—and "Brutus was an honourable man"—but the world was singularly indulgent to the fair spendthrift. As Ellen Graham had said, "the world had not abandoned

Florence, it was Florence who had abandoned the world."

"And is this, indeed, he whom I had placed on so lofty a pedestal!" was the exclamation of the indignant girl. "Verily my idol is dethroned—perhaps I needed this lesson. To love so lightly—to fling from him the tender trusting heart that still, amidst all its follies, so clung to and worshipped him! And is it thus that all men love, thus they keep fealty?"

Ah, Constance! why at that moment did the form of Herbert Malgrove pass before your mental sense, and why did an inward monitor whisper to your soul that not thus had he requited a true woman's love? Never had he been fore-sworn—and not the guiltiest thing that crawled the earth had he spurned, least of all if she had bent before him in penitence and sorrow. It must be owned that her heart's idol suffered by the contrast.

Many and grave, beyond all doubt, Constance admitted, had been the offences of Florence de Malcé, yet the one act that (the circumstances considered) confessedly exalted her, had been made the medium of her condemnation with her guardian, namely, the mortgage, as it had been erroneously termed, on her patrimony of La Garde. Her motive for that act was the liquidation of a debt which, unredeemed, had left a

stain upon her honour. Yes, that was the rich morsel, that the intelligence, that was to greet a trusting lover's ear, ere he could look upon the face of the loved one, and read in it some, perchance, extenuating token, to take from the dread offence—for how much of the sin and shame that led to that act lay at the door of those who forced this step upon her, Constance too truly surmised. But whatever hopes or expectations were founded on her proposed interview with Lord Castleton, were fated to be disappointed. That he had suddenly left Oatlands the day before her arrival, she learned throughout the village. At his town residence the answer to her inquiries was direct enough, but anything but satisfactory. "His lordship had left some days ago by the 'South-Eastern.'"

And by the "South-Eastern" Lady Constance also journeyed, though with little thought that she was on the track of his lordship. But we are anticipating events.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

I am not a crack shot. I cannot split a bullet on a pen-knife.—PELHAM.

LORD CASTLETON sat in the library, on the evening of Herbert's departure, alone once more

with his own thoughts. His feelings were of a mixed nature—remorse, poignant remorse for the wrong done to his betrothed, was among the keenest; scorn of himself, too, for his own weak credulity; intense, intolerable hate of the woman who had woven this dark web of mischief; with vengeance stern and unrelenting, made up their tangled yarn, but beyond all these, and by very far the strongest, was an acute sense of happiness—of boundless, uncontrollable happiness, and this was founded on no hopes for the future, consequent upon a reconciliation with his ward, but arose singly and simply out of the now abiding conviction of her innocence. It seemed to him a delusion that he had ever dared to doubt it—a profanation, that a life-time's penitence could but inadequately atone for.

“My gentle, injured love,” he broke forth, “my life, my darling! your love may never more be mine, yet say not that I have sinned past hope of pardon. Send me not from you utterly desolate; breathe but one word—but one; but, oh, let that word be forgiveness!” And as if she in reality stood there before him, he raised his arms beseechingly. The entrance of a servant dissolved the vision. A letter and card were laid before him, the latter bore the name of Colonel Rivers.

"I will wait upon Colonel Rivers."

The letter was from Sir Harcourt Neville, and ran thus—

"Lord Castleton's imperious demand for vengeance shall no longer be delayed. Time, place, and choice of weapons, Sir Harcourt leaves his lordship to arrange with Colonel Rivers, who waits upon him for that purpose.

"Sir Harcourt Neville offers no apology for his conduct in this case. The insulter (for the title by which his lordship condescends to recognize Sir Harcourt is an erroneous one)—the insulter of Mdle. de Malcé, the truest lady, and withal the most modest, could advance none which he dared venture to hope might on her part be received."

Castleton's reception of Colonel Rivers was not alone gracious, it was suave and gentle, yet the colonel gave him little encouragement, for his own bearing bordered on the ferocious. "And the weapons?" said he, when the rest of the preliminaries were adjusted; "as the challenged, the right of choice belongs to Sir Harcourt, but he has madly enjoined me to leave that choice to your lordship."

"I beg to acknowledge Sir Harcourt's courtesy, but the right of election in this matter clearly being his, I decline invading it."

The frostwork of the colonel's humour melted

in a trice. "My lord, I thank you, in all sincerity I thank you. I am a soldier, and fight better than I preach, but I do thank you from the bottom of my heart on behalf of my friend. Pistols then, by your leave, for though one of the worst swordsmen living, Sir Harcourt Neville is notorious as the first shot in the kingdom. Why, my lord, he never missed aim in his life, always brought his man clean down."

The earl bowed low to conceal the smile he could not suppress, at the coolness and unction with which his visitor gave him over to destruction.

"Then pistols be it, colonel."

"A thousand thanks, my lord. Good-evening. Everything, I am sure, is most satisfactorily arranged. Good-evening—six o'clock—pistols—charming!"

"Charming! most satisfactorily arranged!" echoed his lordship, again smiling.

Now, Lord Castleton was but a sorry marksman, but was, or rather had been, when folly was in the ascendant, one of the most accomplished amateur swordsmen of his day.

Well, it was necessary that some friend should be thought of as second, and after a minute's reflection, half a dozen lines were penned to Arthur Poynings, an old college chum, now a rising man in the ministry, and in less than an



hour that gentleman was announced. He was not much altered since the evening of his introduction to the reader at the Countess Ellerslie's. He was about the earl's age, with a grave set of features, and yet graver demeanour, both of which had borrowed an additional shade at sight of an old and favourite friend, so fearfully changed since they had last shaken hands together.

"I am deuced sorry to see you look so pale and thin, Castleton ; your people wouldn't admit me during your illness, but I was in hopes Devonshire had set you on your feet again. Why, at this rate, diplomacy must be worse than home-consumption."

It was not till a few minutes later that it occurred to the young senator that anything less than State affairs could have effected the change in his friend.

"It has not been quite smooth sailing, certainly, Poynings. Diplomacy never is."

"Not exactly. But this meeting—is there no arranging matters ?

"They are arranged."

"But is there no avoiding it ?"

"No."

"Well, *contre gré*, I will do your bidding."

"A thousand thanks, Poynings ; I am sincerely obliged."

"Humph ! strange obligation—sorry that the

only opportunity I have ever had of serving you should be in so miserable a business ; however, if your mind is made up, I know neither judge nor jury can turn you ; for my part, I have no taste for these sort of things, and if I had, have no time for them."

"What sort of things?"

"Why, love-making, and fighting, for I conclude the last is the sequel to the first."

His lordship slightly coloured, but made no reply.

"Ah ! thought as much," muttered Poynings.

"And what weapons—but swords, of course?"

"No, pistols—by-the-way, I must look to mine."

"Castleton, are you mad?—pistols ! and you so skilful a swordsman ? What on earth possessed you to choose pistols ?"

"Well, in the first place, the choice did not rest with me."

"Then you are the challenger?"

"Even so ; besides, my adversary is an unerring shot, never missed aim in his life."

"That is a reason, certainly ; just like you, Castleton, throwing all the advantages in your opponent's hands."

"My dear Poynings, you would not have me turn assassin ; this man, though a dead shot, has had little or no practice, it seems, with the foil."

"Exactly; and you, though a sorry rifleman, are an expert swordsman. On my soul, Castleton, you accept an invitation to be murdered."

"So Colonel Rivers seemed to intimate; but I beat you, Arthur, at the target," said Castleton, now fairly laughing.

"Well, yes, you beat me at most things, but none could approach you at fencing, not even Tom Garton, now the first duellist on the Continent, where they decidedly top us in the science. I confess I can't see the wit of your standing to be shot at."

"Oh, trust me, Arthur, I don't fight for the wit of the thing," responded Castleton, and he carefully examined his pistols.

"No, there's small wit in making a common target of one's breast, but unless you fire together you can, under the circumstances, have no chance of returning the compliment."

"Not if my adversary's ball brings his man 'clean down,' certainly."

"And Herbert Malgrove, what will he say to this?"

Castleton flushed. "Wake not that echo now, Poynings; it is the one thorn that rankles."

"Ah!—Hounslow Heath, I think?"

"Hounslow Heath—yes."

"It's a good distance."

"But not too distant, Arthur, for as Sir

Lucius would say, there's no 'fighting in peace' within less than ten or a dozen miles of a city."

"Well, I congratulate you upon your sang froid—your gaiety, I might almost say." This was given with a disturbed and even petulant air.

"Sorry I can't do the same by you, Arthur; the Lord High Chancellor could scarcely exhibit a graver front."

"Grave! why, there doesn't appear to be anything particularly enlivening in the prospect of a brace of bullets sent whizzing through your brains, or your heart, it doesn't much matter which."

"Not much, I fancy."

"Well, I know vast little about love, never was in love in my life, hope I never shall be; trouble and skirmishes enough in the House to harass a poor devil without any worse evil. But I always thought the tender passion had the effect of making a fellow melancholy; now except that you really look ill, I should never have guessed you to be at the height of the fever."

"And what is so pre-eminently suggestive of it now?" asked Castleton, half amused.

"Why, I suppose you would not stand to be deliberately shot for anything else; a duel is the general ultimatum of love, I believe, if it is not suicide or marriage."

"Perhaps you hold the two last in the light of equal evils?"

"Well, I don't know but I do; at all events I have no desire to figure as a principal in either case, I assure you. Would to God," he presently exclaimed in an eager, anxious tone, "you would meet this man at fair odds, since meet him you will."

"How at fair odds?"

"Why, at the sword's point."

"That would scarcely be at fair odds; you cannot think so after what I have told you. But I give you my word I apprehend no fatal issue to this affair; believe me, I do not. Sir Harcourt——"

"Who? Sir Harcourt Neville? Good God, Castleton, this fellow is a dead shot! you are certainly mad," and Poynings paled visibly.

"I have not a shadow of apprehension in the matter, Arthur."

"You will apologize, then; that's right."

"*After* the heavy artillery, it is probable. I neither offer nor accept apology before."

"What, it's *infra dig.* in these affairs, is it?"

"Not at all in some cases; in this, knowing so well my man, it would savour strongly of cowardice to do so *before* receiving his fire."

"You have small chance after his fire. However, he may at least prove the wiser man of

the two and forestall you, for I take it he is the aggressor, or you had never challenged him. I know nothing of your quarrel, but I do know you to be the soul of honour."

"Thank you most cordially, Arthur, for this opinion—would to God I better deserved it! but in this instance there is little question but that I, and not Sir Harcourt, am the aggressor; from me, therefore, must come the atonement for the wrong."

"And won't it come more effectually from a living than a dead man, Castleton? If your brains are battered out, atonement, I am thinking, were a trifle too late."

"My dear fellow, at this hour to-morrow morning you and I shall be at breakfast together, contending perhaps for the supremacy of perigord pie over pâtés aux foies gras."

"God grant it!" said the young man, with a depth of feeling that sensibly touched Castleton.

"So, so!" he muttered, as he threw himself into his cab, "who would have suspected our grave ambassador of this kind of folly? What insufferable asses love makes of men, to be sure. The finest fellow in England, with the keenest intellect, and I don't know how many thumping estates, to have his brains scattered to the four winds for a woman! I'd wager a hundred it is that nonpareil of beauty and mischief that has

lately been blazing like a meteor across the fashionable atmosphere. He was eternally at her side. She is lovely as a houri, it's true,—but, Lord, Lord ! her extravagance would beggar the treasury ; and for fighting for her, that I too surely would not, though I were fathoms deep in the love-god's toils ! I never could make it out—and if I never do, no great harm done, I fancy ; the world is full enough of fools without my throwing myself in as a make-weight on the chance of a deficit.”

“There is more feeling beneath that cold exterior than he himself suspects,” was the spoken thought of Castleton as the door closed upon the statesman ; “he has little sensibility and less romance, but he is stanch and true ; no genius, but decided talent and indefatigable industry ; he will rise surely, if not rapidly ; an embryo patriot even at Eton ; and I doubt if his progress in the State be much impeded by any love episode. And now to weightier matter. I must write to Malgrove, in case of the worst.”

That name brought with it, as it always did, a tide of tender recollections.

“Dear, noble fellow ! would that he were happier ! A marvel and a mystery is the human heart,” he mused ; “that Constance Greville can know this man, this stainless gentleman and brave true heart, yet coldly turn him adrift, has

in it something beyond comprehension, for clearly she loves none other. That he, too, should fix his affections (and fixing them they will never swerve) upon the only woman who could have slighted them! Blind, Constance, blind! yet pardoned be all thy errors, sweet one, for thy tender protection of my poor deserted girl!"

The letter was written, the key of his desk enclosed.

"Should I fall," he went on, "(and I have a settled conviction that I shall not), Herbert will protect and vindicate my poor outraged darling. I bequeath her to his care—a precious, precious legacy!—he will be truer to the trust than I have been."

And flinging himself upon a couch, the names of Florence and Malgrove on his lips, the Earl of Castleton fell into a tranquil sleep.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

Give me your pardon, sir; I have done you wrong.

WHEN Castleton and his friend stepped into the carriage before dawn next morning, the latter was by far the graver of the two. He returned brief and scarcely courteous answers to his lord-



ship's remarks, till, incidentally touching upon the ministry, he roused at once, betraying an energy and fervour in his discourse which changed the whole character of his countenance.

"He will be very powerful in the House," thought Castleton, as they alighted. And he was right. Not many years after, Mr. Poynings was one of the soundest and most influential leaders of the cabinet.

They were before their time at the place of rendezvous, and the baronet had not arrived, but there was a third party there. A gentlemanlike man, with a fine intellectual cast of features, immediately saluted Mr. Poynings, who thanked him warmly for his punctuality. The stranger merely bowed to Castleton, who smiled as he acknowledged the courtesy. He surmised at once that he was a surgeon.

In another minute the baronet and Colonel Rivers appeared in sight. It was the first time, except on one too memorable occasion, and then it was under a disguise, that Castleton had seen Sir Harcourt, and his brow darkened and his eye flashed as he bowed his stately head to his deep salutation; but the instant after, as he gazed full into his face, a strange discomposure seized him; that same haughty brow unbent, and the flashing eye softened; yet he who had sought to analyze the cause of this discomposure

had been singularly at fault in any decision he might have come to.

In fact, Lord Castleton was completely taken by surprise. He had expected to see in Sir Harcourt the bold and reckless libertine, glorying in his too notorious reputation, triumphant in audacity: in place of all this, he confronted a man simply of an engaging and very unpretending exterior, with a subdued and even sad expression, yet utterly devoid of all appearance of false sentiment. It was not so much this, however, which fixed the gaze of his lordship, as the air of extreme languor, of positive physical incapacity, under which Sir Harcourt palpably laboured. Thin to emaciation, careworn, and of death-like pallor, it was manifestly with effort that he stood there at all without support, and his left arm he still wore in a sling.

It was but too evident that he had, at the risk of life itself, left his bed to slake Lord Castleton's fierce thirst for vengeance; and there is always something attractive in high courage; neither was the lofty and independent spirit which had disdained all explanation, though he could, in a measure at least, have exculpated himself, without its charm in his lordship's eyes.

It was, perhaps, the first time in his life that Lord Castleton had had occasion to blush from

an acute sense of shame. He stood before the slight and feeble frame of Sir Harcourt self-condemned, painfully conscious that he had acted towards him with neither justice nor generosity, hardly with common delicacy.

Yielding in the onset a too easy faith to Lady Graham's slander of his ward, he found it less difficult to believe that he, whose name stood foremost in the ranks of profligacy, had dared to offer her insult.

Acting on this impression, and under the strong impulse of passion, he had challenged the insulter, and, still under its fatal influence, had urged beyond the courtesy of the gentleman, and the nobler feelings of the man, a meeting which had death for its express object. Convinced at last of the innocence of his ward, or rather shamed out of what he now deemed his scarcely authorized condemnation of her, the conduct of Sir Harcourt naturally assumed a less heinous aspect; he knew not, in point of fact, to what extent he was justified in demanding a meeting of a hostile character. At all hazards, however, he had, since the honour of his ward needed no vindication, resolved on firing in the air. Now there was neither merit nor generosity in this moderation, since none but a coward, or one without the pale of all

honourable sentiment, would fire on a man in his enfeebled condition.

The arrangements, notwithstanding, proceeded much after the usual cold-blooded fashion peculiar to these affairs.

Mr. Poynings (how reluctantly need not be told) proposed on Lord Castleton's part that Sir Harcourt should fire first. This was vehemently overruled on the part of the baronet by his second, and it was then agreed that they should fire together.

When all was pronounced ready, and the signal about to be given, Sir Harcourt stepped, or rather tottered, forward, and requested the honour of his lordship's attention for a single moment.

"In the event of my falling, I beg you, my lord"—and the voice though low was perfectly steady—"I beg you, and I entreat all present, to bear testimony to my last solemn declaration of the entire innocence of Mdlle. de——"

"Hold, sir!" hastily and in extreme agitation interrupted Lord Castleton; "your pardon, but this lady's name must be sacred."

Sir Harcourt bowed, and then in a yet lower tone resumed—

"Of my deep remorse for the insult offered to this lady, no words, my lord, may adequately

convey an idea ; and if I do not proffer the fullest apology, it is because no atonement——”

Again Lord Castleton, waving his hand, interrupted him, but this time in a tone and with a gesture of marked and most gentle courtesy——

“We will speak of this a few seconds later, Sir Harcourt.”

“My lord, a few seconds later may be too late.”

“I think not, Sir Harcourt, and we are detaining these gentlemen ;” and turning to Poynings, who muttered, “I knew it was a woman,” he held out his hand for the weapon of death—— for it is miserrble sophistry which can dignify by other name than murder an act which deliberately plans, and as deliberately executes, destruction on another.

In this instance, it is true, Lord Castleton stood acquitted, but even he had been unchecked by the enormity of the offence ; he simply abstained from imbruing his hands in human blood because here, by all the laws of chivalry, nay, by the yet stronger ones of justice and humanity, he was forbidden to do so ; while the baronet, though he had turned away with a disappointed and even saddened air at the earl’s refusal to listen to him, shrank none the less from the act as in itself an act of evil, still less had he been de-

tered by any sense of fear ; whatever his faults, cowardice was not of the number.

Slowly and sadly Sir Harcourt confronted his seemingly relentless foe. The signal was given, and they fired simultaneously—Lord Castleton in the air, while the ball of his adversary passed through his right shoulder, merely, however, grazing the bone.

Sir Harcourt was more than shocked ; he was unutterably distressed.

“Would to God I had divined your generous intention, my lord,” he exclaimed, hurrying forward. “Heaven be my judge, I came hither with no hostile feeling, but rather with a deep inextinguishable sense of remorse. I sought to avoid this ; Rivers can tell you I aimed to the right. If I had thought—if I could have hoped—but pardon me, you seemed determined.”

“I *was* determined. Hear me, Sir Harcourt ; but first assure yourself that this is the merest flesh-wound. When we stood face to face it was too late to offer or accept apology ; too late, at all events, for my reputation for me to withdraw. You are known never to miss your aim, and I had no ambition to figure on every sign-post in the metropolis as a poltroon ; yet, if I had fired upon you in your present condition, I should have been something worse, I take it. It was indeed meeting at fearful odds. Frankly,

however, Sir Harcourt, I had other reasons. I owe you an apology for my former intemperance of language, which but *one* provocation, and one alone, perhaps, could justify—or shall I say excuse? Will it suffice for all explanation to admit that I wrote under a misapprehension? Sir Harcourt Neville, I ask your pardon”—and Castleton held out his hand—his left hand—with honest warmth.

The baronet was powerfully moved by this frank acknowledgment of the earl's. Charmed from the first by a bearing so devoid of pretension, yet so strangely impressive, he was completely subdued by the mingled generosity and feeling of his present address.

“It is from me rather than from your lordship that apology should come. I would give all the little life I have left to undo the past. But, oh! Lord Castleton”—and now his voice sunk almost to a whisper—“snow is less white, the holy angels not purer, than is the soul of this lady! But you grow pale—you are faint.”

It was true: what loss of blood failed to produce these words effected. In the innermost deep of Castleton's soul lay the conviction of his ward's innocence; it needed no further confirmation; and yet—the unutterable joy with which he drank in those words!

Yes, he *was* faint—sick—with the delicious

sense of security. In a moment, however, he rallied.

"Sir Harcourt, may I beg a word with you?"

They withdrew a few paces out of hearing.

"There were, I believe," and Lord Castleton's brow flushed, painfully flushed, "some debts—gambling debts—on the part of—in short, as you possibly know, I am guardian to—to—"

"To Mdle. de Malcé," put in the baronet.

Castleton winced. He could not bear to hear that name on those lips.

"There were; they are discharged, my lord, long since; and not one fraction would I have received, but that the lady's rigid honour claimed to be more than satisfied."

"Undoubtedly," returned Castleton, with all his natural loftiness.

"Granted, my lord, but here, as I tried to explain, it was little less than a fraud; the lady was a baby, a mere baby at the game she so heedlessly sat down to; a tool in the hands of others for some dark purpose; for her, she had no thought beyond the amusement of an idle hour, unless it were a desire to please those who urged her on. She had never played in her life before."

Castleton started; Sir Harcourt saw that he did. The shrewd man of the world understood



it all. Castleton was too proud to question Sir Harcourt, however, and that too he saw.

"It was a friend of Lady Graham," he said slowly and subtly, "who urged on the heavy stakes that at last left me a winner of some thousands. Even now I should be proud to refund these sums scarce honourably mine; I urged this upon your ward at the time, and subsequently at Mrs. Hamilton's masquerade, with much, oh, much earnestness! I pray you to believe me, Lord Castleton."

"I do believe you, Sir Harcourt," returned his lordship with feeling, "but this cannot be; and now fare you well, we may not meet again, but I shall carry with me a vivid remembrance of your forbearance, and, I will add, your generosity, on this occasion."

They shook hands—both were moved, perhaps Sir Harcourt most. He turned silently away.

Why was there so much evil when there was so much good in this man? Voluptuary though he was, he was not without a certain chivalrous sense of honour, with much of the kindly feeling which distinguishes the true gentleman; but a long course of profligacy, if it had not hardened, had more than half corrupted a nature originally noble. Sir Harcourt Neville was formed for better things. The world had much to answer for; it had spoiled him by its indulgence, which is an

encouragement to vice, when it should have turned indignantly from him.

Castleton and his friend Poynings did not, as the former predicted, quarrel over the delicacies of the breakfast-table that morning, for Dr. Ellis's verdict was "solitary confinement" for his patient, who did not rebel; he was worn and weary, and before noon ill and fevered. The skill and caution, however, of his physician, together with the calm of his mind after the racking torture of the last few weeks, achieved wonders in the next two days. It was on the morning after their meeting that Castleton received the following letter from the baronet:—

"MY LORD—It is a part of the punishment due to a misspent life that I and your lordship may meet no more. The greater the necessity, then, since that decree may not be reversed, that all debts between us two should be cancelled; and notwithstanding what passed at our late painful meeting in the way of explanation, I feel that I still owe one to you, and to the sweet lady I have so wronged.

"One wild delirious moment made me a greater villain than, I *think*, I had ever been before. That wrong her gentle nature will pardon me, sooner than I shall pardon myself; but it is not of this I would immediately speak.

"Rumour has long coupled your lordship's name

with this lady's : lofty as are your name and fame among men, loftier will both shine out if she may share them. Oh, Lord Castleton! heed no slanderer's tongue that would defame this most virtuous lady. Mistrust, above all, her to whose charge I am told you confided her on quitting England. Foul reports have reached you, I know—false as foul!

“It is true that Mdle. de Malcé did leave the opera with me—with me alone—for some hellish purpose it was designed that she should do so. We drove away together, not unobserved by many bystanders.

“Lord Castleton, I am less familiar with virtue than with vice, but he must have been rampant indeed in this last who could have looked upon the fair, anguished face of this lady, so holy in its expression of guileless trust, and wronged her by so much as an evil thought. No matter, with whatever views I entered my carriage, that sight dissolved them, as snow beneath the sun-ray.

“There was but one way in which I could effectually serve this so strangely deserted fair one—at once to rid her of my presence; and this I did. She made her way to Brook Street alone.

“The gambling transaction I *now* see was another lure into which your ward was betrayed for no other purpose than that she might be

proclaimed a gamester, even beyond the Russian frontier.

I come to the last act of the drama, in which I appeared with her—the masked ball at Mrs. Hamilton's.

“Some men boast that they are governed by a good and evil genius; I have been less fortunate, only the last has presided over my destiny. The promptings of the foul fiend alone could have tempted me to a dishonourable proposal in that quarter; but it fell hurtless. The mind was too pure to conceive its meaning.

“Yes, Lord Castleton, to this hour it is my belief, as it is my consolation to believe, that the purity of your ward saved her from a full comprehension of the insult offered.

“I have little more to add. Blessings come ill from the lips of the profligate. Take nothing from me, then, but a parting caution—‘Beware the poison in the cup of gold, the asp among the flowers!’ ‘Watch weel.’”

“Too late! too late!” ejaculated Castleton, as the letter fell from his trembling hand. “Given in time this caution had saved me an eternity of remorse. *My* insult, pressed in language that had disgraced a denizen of St. Giles’, *was understood*. Of a verity this modern Paris teaches me a lesson I might have studied with advantage. And I—I, in insolent egotism, dared to

hold myself this man's superior ! Fool ! no less than barbarian, it is fit I reap the harvest I have sown."

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

A buried treasure,  
A cradle of young thoughts of wingless pleasure,  
A violet-shaded grave of woe.

LORD CASTLETON woke next morning from a tranquil sleep to find Herbert bending over him, but his joy received a sudden check on seeing the expression in that beloved face.

It would be difficult to say whether alarm, grief, or displeasure was most conspicuous. Castleton's bandaged arm lay outside the coverlet—that had told the tale. His stiffened fingers were in his friend's grasp as he knelt beside the bed.

"Speak, Castleton," he exclaimed in a voice of piercing agony ; "is this the hand of"—"a murderer," was on his lips ; but there was something in the expression of Stratford's face that stayed its utterance.

"Herbert, his life has never been endangered ; my shot went whizzing through the air, and his——"

But Herbert heard no more. He sprung to his feet—he raised his clasped hands—

“My God, I thank Thee!” he exclaimed, with profound reverence.

The tide of joy that filled his breast seemed as though it would burst it. His alarm and suffering it had been painful enough to witness, but “a touch more rare” subdued the heart of Castleton at this gush of happiness. He bent forward.

“Dear old fellow! how could you doubt me?”

His lordship never spoke to Malgrove as he did to others. There was such an abandon of tenderness in tone and gesture.

“How, indeed? Forgive me; I should have known you could only act as honour dictated.”

“Nay, God knows what madness I had not committed had you not stayed my hand—my saviour ever!”

“But your arm, Stratford? for I had no thought but for him.”

“Well, the ball whizzed clean through it; not the first that has paid me the like compliment, you may remember.”

“Stratford, make no boast of such matters, pray; I had rather not remember.”

“Well, well, no harm was done. For myself, I fired in the air, and so—and so, in newspaper cant, ‘the affair terminated amicably.’”

"But why have met at all? Stratford, I have reason to believe that this Sir Harcourt is, though an erring, a brave, true gentleman."

"I am sure he is; the greater the obligation on my part to apologize for the misconception under which I laboured at the time I wrote to him."

"But was it essential to this apology that you should go armed with instruments of destruction?"

"I believe, Herbert, it was, after all I had heard of the steadiness of his aim. What do you think of his snuffing out a candle at thirty paces?"

"Why, that an Indian juggler for sixpence might have beat him at the feat by doing it at forty. But you are friends?"

"Certainly not enemies. Nor was it any fault of his that we did not shake hands at the outset. I was resolute to receive his fire; to return it was out of the question, though all the malice of a Thersites had possessed me. It was but the 'basso relievo of a man,' as old Andrew Marvel would have called him, that confronted me; yet am I very certain there was in him the spirit of a hero to do battle."

"Do not, pray, associate the idea of a hero with that of a duellist; there can be little in common between them."

"A fallacy, Sir Priest, depend upon it. One murder makes a villain; millions, a hero. But, Herbert, there is a deeper wound than this," glancing at his arm, "to which only your skill may minister. You know all I would ask. Is she well?"

"Nay, that were too much to expect, even perhaps to desire. She is much changed."

The brow of Castleton contracted, his lips quivered, and a muttered curse, coupled with the name of Graham, escaped him.

"Nay, is not this unreasonable?" inquired Herbert, tenderly. "Would you that she were the blithesome bird she has been? To me, Stratford, her pale grief, her sweet contrition, are a thousand, oh! a thousand times more endearing than when, in all the brilliancy of her wondrous captivations, she challenged the admiration of a world! It may be that the first dewy sweetness is brushed from off the wing of her purity, but her truth, her heavenly truth, is unsullied—over that the serpent trail has not passed; and her child-like faith, her loving trust, are strong as ever. Oh! Stratford, amid all her faults, of what a jewel had you despoiled yourself had you rashly driven her from you!"

Castleton looked with a kind of despair in his friend's face.



"Herbert, I *have* driven her from me, and you know it. It is too late—the past cannot be undone."

"No, the past too surely cannot be undone—the past must be repaired. Do you conceive I am here without the full assurance of her forgiveness?"

"No, I am sure you are not, if the wrong could have been multiplied fourfold; I know her gentle, generous nature too well. Had I killed her, she had gone to heaven like Desdemona, sighing she had done the deed—but for love, Herbert, that love for which alone I once lived—that love which once, oh Heaven! was mine—it has passed away, never more to bloom for me. Did I not cast it from me—fool, madman that I was!—did I not spurn it, and shall I now ask it back? And if I did—if I did—reason and feeling must alike reject my prayer."

Herbert looked gravely in Castleton's face for some seconds.

"Then is truth itself a liar. Stratford, unloved, uncared for as I have been through life, and all unskilled as I may be in sounding the depth and tenderness of a woman's heart, I can scarcely, I think, be mistaken in my conviction that your image is engraven on the heart of Florence de Malcé fondly, faithfully as ever."

Such an assurance from the lips of Herbert

Malgrove, without that touching allusion to himself, had poured a flood of joy upon the stricken soul of Castleton ; even now a throb of deep and dear delight shot through every fibre of his frame, but in the next moment he was absorbed in mournful contemplation of his friend—that friend so early loved, so truly revered, and so confidently trusted in—that friend who, forgetful alone of himself, so rarely adverted to his own feelings, and even now had done so unconsciously, for he was but echoing his everyday thought.

“And why, Herbert, are you unloved, uncared for? and why unskilled in the lore of woman’s heart?”

Herbert started, as if only then aware of his inadvertence.

“Nay, do not speak, do not think of me, Stratford.”

“Of whom, then, must I think and speak? Am I, indeed, so steeped in egotism as to be unmoved by what so nearly affects your happiness? Heaven be my judge that my own hopes, and that I have one left in life I owe to you, were less, far less, to me than your peace of mind.”

“And I were beneath the brute did I doubt this. Oh! trust me, I am not insensible to the dear blessing of your friendship. You and young

Edward are the sole links that bind me to an otherwise lonely and loveless existence. But enough of this."

"Not yet enough ; for wherefore should it be so ? Herbert, is there none whose tenderness (for who so formed as yourself to inspire it ?) that might soften the pang *her* coldness has inflicted ?"

"None, Stratford, none. Oh ! never for another may the sleeping echoes of love be awakened in this weary breast ! Nor am I, as you deem, formed to inspire tenderness, or surely something akin to it must have responded to a love like mine—a devotion so deep—a homage so fervent ; nay, urge me no further—leave me the right to dream of her still, for, dream though it be, I would not lose the sweet memory of Constance Greville for all that the living earth has of lovely and most loving in its stead. Call it weakness—madness—what you will ; but there comes not a murmur from the rippling brook, a breath from the perfumed flowers, not a song from the birds, not even a wail from the forest-trees, with their soft and soul-like sounds, but reminds me of her—her voice—her sigh—her smile ; the whispering winds syllable her name—my own heart echoes it ; it paints her form—her peerless form ! and phantom, dream, illusion though it be, I am blest !"

He buried his head in the folds of the coverlet. but not before Castleton saw that there was that in the workings of his features which a man would not that even a mother's gaze should rest upon. Presently he calmed himself.

"No, leave me these memories, Stratford; leave me the paradise my fancy or my folly has created—this phantom of happiness—a dear, it may be a dangerous, delight, but one I cannot lose—and live!"

Herbert had spoken with all the passionate tenderness of his fervent nature, and Castleton saw that it was indeed vain to urge him further. Every hope, every aspiration in life, would he have resigned to have brought balm to his stricken soul, but it might not be; so far as earthly love was concerned, he had truly typified his heart as "ashes;" yet, moved as he was, Castleton could not immediately turn to another theme, though 'twere the dearest. Herbert was the first to revert to it. Passing one hand languidly through the masses of hair that had fallen over his forehead, he held out the other to his friend.

"How can I torture you with all this, at such a time, too?—forgive me;" and a smile as sweet, if not as bright, as in earlier and happier days, lit up the pale and noble features—"we are wandering strangely from our sweet Florence."

"Our' sweet Florence!" That little mono-

syllable "our"—it seemed to bind them closer still in the bonds of everlasting sympathy.

"Then tell me all now, Herbert, of 'our sweet Florence.'"

And Herbert did tell him all—a faithful and most generous chronicler. Nor word nor glance, nor blush nor sigh, tear nor smile, was forgotten ; and each and all were registered in Castleton's memory, never more to be effaced from its tablets, yet never to be recalled without intolerable anguish—anguish the more torturing that it sprung from self-reproach.

At that part of the recital which referred to the letter given by Florence to Sir Harcourt at the masquerade, Castleton betrayed extreme agitation. This letter, then, which—like the handkerchief of Othello—had seemed so fatally corroborative of her guilt, this letter contained after all but the liquidation of a debt which, left unpaid, had stained her name with dishonour. Oh, fatal, fatal misconception ! And her insensibility, too, had been the result of mingled feelings of love and shame at his sudden apparition.

Again must we pause for a moment in pitying wonder at the credulity, the weakness, and the blind prejudice of the very wisest among the children of men. How simple now appeared this mighty matter ; Sir Harcourt's support of

his ward had then been the natural consequence of that brief sickness of soul which had seized her at sight of him ; to what a different account had it been set down ; true, the passionate embrace of the knight might have been omitted with advantage, but ought she to be made responsible for the folly of another ?

Then came the fact of Lady Graham's silent acquiescence in the dangerous intimacies she had contracted. Her scheme was now transparent enough. "Honest, honest Iago !" Why it was the straightforward honesty of this woman that had made the high-souled Castleton her dupe ; her honesty, and the purposeless motive for deceiving him, even as the seeming frankness of Iago commended him alike to the noble Moor and his gentle lady.

Self-reliant and secure in her own unblemished reputation, doubly secure in Lord Castleton's exaggerated estimate of that reputation, she had marched steadily on to the final act of the drama, one which involved a no less fatal issue than the dishonour of the woman to whom he stood solemnly pledged. And the whole scheme was so cleverly conceived, so ingeniously knit together, and vile as was the tale she told, alike monstrous in its daring, and impudent in its mendacity, so strangely interwoven with truth,

that hardly the most suspicious nature had believed it counterfeit. -

Too certainly was it "a thread of candour with a web of wiles."

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

God speed you on your errand, noble knight !

WITHIN an hour after the close conference between the friends, for Herbert would listen to no more fine-spun arguments on the part of his lordship, they stood together on the platform of the South-Eastern Railway.

The sufferings Castleton had undergone had left fearful ravages in form and face ; now, however, the excitement of his mind burnt in the eye and on the cheek, lending a fictitious appearance of health which in no degree deceived Herbert, but he knew that the air of La Garde would medicine him back to life—to love, to happiness, and therefore to health and life.

At the last moment Castleton hung back. Herbert had twice re-echoed his earnest "God bless you," the last bell had ceased, and an official had respectfully intimated that "the time was hup ;" still he lingered, the train was in motion, and at last he sprung into one of the

empty carriages, and the door was slammed to; but hurriedly his lordship let down the glass.

"Anything forgotten?" said Herbert, moving on with the train.

"You know Foxley?"

"No!"

"What not the owner of that fine old place at Sedgely, not far from Beechgrove?"

Herbert nodded, yet looked a little mystified. The train was slowly moving on, but at Castleton's anxious look and impetuous call he strode on, placing his hand on the sill of the window.

"What of him?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing!—only Constance refused him a month back."

Herbert loosed his hold, and in another minute the monster machine was out of sight, but many and many a minute elapsed ere he stirred from the spot, rooted there it should seem by his friend's significant words. At last a porter, with good-natured officiousness, informed him that "there was never a train going, nor never a train expected, for more nor half a hour."

"That proves nothing," mused Herbert.

The man stared, and reiterated his information. This roused him, and with his usual kindness of manner he thanked him and walked on.

"It proves nothing, this rejection of Foxley,



or, if anything, only the fidelity of that passion which it is agony enough to me to know can never be returned. In less than twenty-four hours Stratford will be at her feet, and this is my work—mine!—I, who would pour out the last drop of blood in my veins to purchase her happiness. And is it even so, Constance, that knowing your heart's cherished secret—ay, holding, perhaps, your future peace in the hollow of my hand—I should so have dealt by you? Traitor! traitor! to the best and dearest! Castleton's separation from that poor child ensured, what might not time have effected? he of so noble and attaching a nature, you so good and true? Yes, from the ruins of the past had perchance sprung up an affection not less pure, if less passionate, than this."

Thus far only in that direction extended the soliloquy of Herbert; his mind, sublimated to the extremest point of refinement, instinctively rejected this last thought, not alone as a miserable sophism, but as an insult to the delicacy of Constance herself.

That Castleton had ever loved again was extremely problematical; but that she, so refined and generous, would ever have accepted a love raised from out the ashes of a first most passionate attachment, and upon a misconception which it was in her power to adjust, he admitted to be

altogether impossible. Happiness at the cost of another! and that other the gentle, confiding girl who had none but her in the wide world to cling to—never!

Nor did Herbert fail to call to mind that all the indignant pride of her woman's nature had been roused by Castleton's desertion of his ward, and all her generous sympathies enlisted in behalf of the forsaken one. She was, therefore, the very last to plant her own standard on the spot marked by her friend's downfall, and Herbert saw and felt all this after a moment's calm reflection.

No; they had both worked together, he and Constance, to one and the same end; hers had been the most self-sacrificing part it is true, she had everything to lose if she succeeded, but then how much on the other hand to gain—a union between two noble-hearted beings whom treachery had sought to divide.

Yes, Lady Graham was full soon to find, as Malgrove predicted, the "poisoned chalice" returned to her own lips. That evening, when Dr. Ellis called in Park Lane, his patient was many, many miles on his way to La Garde. A gentle smile answered Herbert's warm acknowledgments to him on his friend's behalf, one more arch curled his lips, as with a bow he accepted the apology of "an engagement of the

most pressing nature" for his lordship's abrupt departure from town.

"So, so, another rehearsal of the old, old story—a duel, *id est*—a woman! A journey at thunderbolt speed—arm still in a sling—pulse over a hundred; well, there's no cure in medicine for this species of lunacy."

And this verdict quieting the doctor's conscience, his reflections came to a sudden halt.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

Oh! let my soul's deep anguish plead to thee,  
With more than mortal eloquence!

HAD Lord Castleton been hastening to the arms of his bride in all the glow of triumphant love he had still been overcome, for tumultuous joy is akin to pain, but now thronging memories of the dead De Malcé came back as in mockery of all joy. At every turn the spectre of his friend rose to rebuke his unmanly desertion of his orphan child, that child so solemnly bequeathed to him in the twofold capacity of lover and guardian. To each trust he had proved a recreant, alike outraging the dead and the living.

In his arms De Malcé expired, his last act

joined his hand with his child's, his last glance rested on him in unshaken faith in the trust reposed in him—him the violator of that sacred trust.

Half maddened by these harrowing memories, Castleton wavered in his purpose of attempting to see his forsaken one, but, who "hesitates is lost," and so it came to pass that all his resolves melting into thin air before the omnipotence of his passion, the sun's last rays fell that same evening upon the kneeling figure of the penitent.

Paler than the sheeted dead he gazes despairingly into her face, while life itself seems exhaling from the half-fainting girl, who yet makes so brave an effort to master her own emotion, appalled by the mighty outburst that shakes well-nigh to dissolution the frame of her lover. Yet her soft caresses might reassure him, and her touching humility calm the hurricane within. As he bends in lowliest suppliance before her, her arms encircle his head, which she presses to her bosom, murmuring in answer to his anguished prayers and self-upbraidings, "Ah no, no, Stratford—I deserved it all—it is for you to forgive."

Oh, human love! oh, human endurance! who may presume to gauge its depth or its strength when its shrine is a woman's breast, for boundless as space is the one, fathomless as the ocean the other!

"I will not," said Castleton, with a frankness peculiarly his own, "attempt to palliate my most deplorable infatuation. If sorrow the most poignant, remorse deeper than ever man suffered, be permitted to plead in extenuation of this excess of madness, oh, deign to believe that I am not utterly unworthy your forgiveness! yet bankrupt in all but inextinguishable gratitude and love, I dare not hope, I scarcely dare to sue!"

He "dare not sue!" Well, it was not necessary. No matter for details. Lord Castleton was forgiven, as most of his wilful sex are sure sooner or later to be though never so deeply sinning. In that faltering voice, that drooping form, in the yielding softness of that tearful eye and quivering lip, he saw that she was once more all his own.

How, oh how, had he deserved this blessing! Silently he invoked the spirit of the dead count to sanctify their re-union. Solemnly he once again pledged his faith, never more to be broken!

And can it be doubted that both these erring mortals were better and wiser for the ordeal through which they had passed? The social if not the moral character of the man was improved. His stern philosophy softened, chastened, the gentler, tenderer features of his character came out in bolder relief. There was,

in fact, more scope for their exercise, for deeply, indeed, had the pride of the hitherto haughty and self-sustained noble been abased.

And she—his re-affianced bride ; well, the world will never more deceive her ; its tumult, its strife, and its fever are for ever at an end. She has drained the golden chalice, the bitterness of the dregs have bred disgust. Henceforward she will drink more moderately and at a purer fountain. In the bosom of her lover, now soon to become her husband, she will find, as Herbert long ago predicted, her haven of sweetest rest, her altar, and her home.

But a few months were wanting to the attainment of her twentieth year, when duty would be reconciled to love. Apart from affection every honourable motive impelled his lordship to prove to the world his boundless confidence in the future Countess of Castleton.

“ If you would for ever silence the tongue of slander,” wrote Herbert, “ nothing will so effectually attain this end as your ward’s marriage with the proud and fastidious Earl of Castleton.”

And now his lordship could afford to smile at the sarcasm. The old Roman character was fast fading out of the proud earl, and mercy and charity engrafting themselves on the nobler elements that so exalted him among men—

justice, high courage, and chivalrous generosity of soul.

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### CHAPTER XXX.

By my troth a goodly couple,  
All happiness attend their nuptials.

WHILE Constance for the succeeding two months remained at La Garde, the cherished guest of the fair châtelaine, Herbert was once more among loving hearts at Oatlands.

Lady Malgrove, too, with the boy-heir returned to the Rectory, bringing with her a sweet, bright girl scarce twenty summers old, owning to, nay, glorying in an unblushing devotion to the handsome rector, but as after this avowal some explanation is due on the demoiselle's part we will briefly refer to the circumstance that led to her advent at Oatlands.

Travelling abroad after the departure of Emily Malgrove, who had gone to visit her family in Wales, Herbert was one night summoned in his office of minister of the gospel to the sick bed of a lady, the widow of an English officer. His care was needed in more ways than one—the scene soon closed, Mrs. Shirley expired, leaving

a daughter, a step-daughter, alone in a strange land and all but destitute, for even the funeral expenses were defrayed by Herbert.

Unfriended orphanage was a sure passport to his generous heart, and he at once constituted himself the guardian of Kate Shirley ; he had been glad, it is true, to have transferred her to Emily's protection in Wales, but the grateful, albeit, unreflecting, girl pleaded so hard to be allowed to remain with her new-found friend that Herbert had no heart to say her nay, and so he placed her with the curé and his wife, and she saw her guardian, as she lovingly persisted in styling Herbert, every day, and before long, for she was of a frank, free nature, she confided to him her one secret. She was engaged to be married as soon as her lover could afford to keep a wife. He was settled in London as a lawyer ; "a lawyer," said the smiling girl, "without a client, so I dare say I shall be an old maid before Charlie can ask me to come home."

"No, you shall be spared so heavy a calamity, sweet Kate."

And that night Herbert wrote to Arthur Poynings in behalf of the "lawyer without a client," and secured to the worthy young fellow, for such he proved, a fast friend, and everything was put in train for the early marriage of the



young couple. It was to be celebrated at Oatlands, and it was in anticipation of the event, though it was to be kept quite quiet in the village, that Miss Shirley was now a guest at the Rectory.

But the more ambitious nuptials of the Earl of Castleton were to take the precedence, and Oatlands was in a ferment, though Oatlands, alas! was not to be the scene of their celebration.

That both his lordship and Herbert had preferred that the event should come off in that dear old place was beyond a doubt, but it might not be. La Garde was the home of the bride, her only home it had been till the death of her father, and reverence to the memory of that dear father, affection to her tenantry, and a thousand old associations combined to make it *the* place from which she should go forth a bride.

None the less, however, did the joy-bells ring out their loudest though not perhaps their merriest peal at Oatlands, for the disappointment was felt a good deal. The ox was roasted whole, however, and the wassail-cup went round, and as usual Herbert, so soon as he came back, poured oil upon the wound.

"This is but a rehearsal," he said, "preparatory to the great day of the earl's return, when he would present to them his wife, whose fair young face they could not have forgotten—pre-

sent her to them to stay among them as their late countess had done," and so three cheers to the fair young bride and her liege lord resounded through the village of brave old Oatlands.

That the marriage ceremony of the Earl of Castleton was performed by his friend will be surmised.

The Marquis and Marchioness St. Marée were present, the former giving away the bride, while Constance, with two other young ladies, officiated as bridesmaids.

Constance remained some two or three weeks with Mdme. St. Marée at La Garde, Herbert almost immediately returning to his duties at Oatlands, and almost as immediately falling into a state of health which sensibly alarmed Lady Malgrove.

Again the South of France was urged upon him for the winter months, but he only shook his head, and tried to put a more cheerful aspect on the matter, while those around him looked the sadder, and silently prayed Heaven for his restoration.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

They stood aloof the scars remaining.

COLERIDGE.

THE "Lady of Beechgrove" is once more at home, but she is somewhat sad, and, oh, so lonely! She misses her amiable kinswoman—misses still more the companionship of that radiant girl, in whose soft warm heart she had made for herself an interest so absorbing as to have ceased to mourn her heart's lost venture.

Her round of visits must be paid—she would begin with the Rectory. Lady Malgrove was out and Constance went on to the Tarletons. Laura and she, though so differently constituted, had been dear and very intimate friends, and Frank Tarleton, her brother, was at home, and ill.

Almost immediately on entering the grounds she met Herbert Malgrove. A slight bow, a quickened step, and she had passed him. In the next moment her self-possession, lost on the instant, was recovered, and with both hands held out she turned back; but it was too late, he was met by young Tarleton, and was entering the house with him.

"So," she murmured, "a cold and formal bow is the only greeting vouchsafed to the companion of my girlhood, the cherished friend

of later years. What inexplicable mystery impelled me to treat him thus? Why I should have given my hand to the humblest village girl in Oatlands. Oh, Herbert! when is this miserable estrangement to end—will it ever end?"

She had now reached the Shrubberies—a white dress was visible through the trees, but Constance half hesitated to advance, for, on a low garden seat, her face buried in her handkerchief, sat Laura Tarleton.

A sharp pang shot through the heart of Constance at this sight. Herbert had just left her; he was returning, when she met him, from the path which led to the summer-house. She knew how much he was beloved by the whole family, by Laura more than all, she had never sought to disguise the warmth of her friendship, and Constance now recalled many a blushing sign and symbol of a feeling beyond that of friendship, nor had it escaped her observation that from the period of Herbert's departure from Oatlands, the spirits of Laura had drooped. Little more than a year ago she had been the most light-hearted, as she was certainly one of the most beautiful and high-spirited, girls in the county.

"Dear Laura," said Constance, stooping to kiss her, "what is all this?"

Miss Tarleton rose hurriedly, and flinging back a shower of ebon curls from a face in which tears and blushes seemed contending for victory, assured her visitor that she was the very, very happiest girl in all the world.

"These are tears of joy, indeed—indeed they are, or should be," she added, turning from the searching gaze bent on her, "for Frank, dear Frank, is once more restored to us—restored as from the grave; but perhaps you have seen him."

"Scarcely; he joined Mr. Malgrove at the end of the walk."

"Mr. Malgrove; yes, he has just left me. Oh, Constance! what a perfect being is Herbert Malgrove! Ah, you blush!—blush, perhaps, that I should so speak of him—yet I would say it before the whole world. I am no longer the wild, thoughtless romp you used to shake your head at one short year ago; what you now hear me declare is not simply the creed of the girl, but the strong abiding conviction of the woman. And have I not cause to love and reverence him? Twice has our poor, foolish Frank been saved by him; but let us go in, Constance, for I would not that the very birds should hear me prate of my brother's faults. You know Frank's fatal propensity for the gaming-table. Ah! it was that which ploughed the first furrow

on my father's brow, and wrung from me, giddy girl that I was, the first real tears that I had ever shed. Once my father liquidated his debts without one upbraiding word ; yet a second time he did so, but refused to see or hold any communication with him ; but Mr. Malgrove was the mediator between them, and who may resist him ?—Frank was forgiven, with, however, a fearful proviso attached to this forgiveness—he must renounce the gaming-table on pain of disinheritorance. My father loves us tenderly, I am sure ; but he is a soldier and a disciplinarian, and never would he have revoked his solemn vow after his third delinquency."

"And did your brother again dare——"

"Yes, yes ; dear imprudent boy, yet if you only knew—oh, it was a demon tempted him ! told him he would not alone recover his heavy losses, but rise a winner. Well, he did not win, —deeper and deeper he sunk till maddened—oh, I am sure he was mad !—the rest is fearful, Constance—he resolved on self-destruction !"

Here the poor girl's utterance was impeded by suffocating sobs.

"Well, his saviour again was Herbert Malgrove, my father's saviour too ; for his son's dishonour would have broken the old man's heart, though his spirit had been unbent. For three days

and nights Mr. Malgrove never left poor Frank, and refused to return without him. The debt was paid and paid by him. My father knows nothing. Would that I were of age, and my fortune at my command. Again you start, and your cheek flushes—it need not. I do not,” she said, mournfully shaking her head, “I do not mean that I might lay it at Herbert Malgrove’s feet, for he would spurn the offering if I did; no, not spurn, he is too good for that, but he would not care to accept it from me.”

Constance was touched. “How know you this, Laura?” she asked, in the low sweet voice peculiar to her.

There was a good deal of honest pride in that young girl’s rejoinder, and surely nothing of immodesty, as she fixed her keen but searching gaze upon her companion.

“I do know this,—ah, too well I know it, and forgive me—but I think Lady Constance Greville knows it too—knows that the heart of Herbert Malgrove is a ruined shrine; for poor and untitled, though rich in every virtue, it may be that the high-born heiress of countless thousands scorns an alliance with him.”

Surprised at this singular frankness, pained as well, for the arrow had sped home, and not a little embarrassed, Constance would gladly have

changed the conversation ; but she had been struck by the allusion, twice made, to the poverty of Herbert. It tempted her to learn more on this head.

" You speak of Mr. Malgrove's poverty, dear Laura."

" Yes ; how can he be rich who gives his all away ? and except his living of Oatlands, he has nothing, literally nothing—and it is not a rich one either—not half the value of the Seaton living in the gift of Lord Castleton."

" True, but Mr. Malgrove refused it that he might be near his friend——"

" Not the only one he coveted to be near," returned Laura, in a low voice.

" Then, pardon me, Herbert enjoys the late Lady Malgrove's jointure."

" Oh, that's long since swamped in paying off the heavy mortgages on the family property, of which he inherits not a single acre. Nay, Emily herself was my informant ; chance alone made her acquainted with this appropriation of his own little property. She is, as she says, a pensioner upon his bounty, for her husband was an awful spendthrift, and died fearfully involved ; besides, the rent-roll was at best but a sorry one. And what would become of our poor if it were not for him ?"

" Nay, be just, dear girl. The munificence of



Lord Castleton saves Oatlands from the curse of poverty. You seem to forget this."

"No, indeed; Herbert Malgrove permits none to forget Sultan the 'Magnificent,' but with all his lavish generosity, he is not half so dearly loved as his friend. As the Lord of Oatlands, a man of rank and influence, and the princely dispenser of boundless wealth, he is looked up to, I admit, loved perhaps—admired and talked of, anyway."

"Laura! Laura!"

"Yes, you think me prejudiced, Constance."

"I *know* you are."

"Well, why does he not live among his tenantry, then, as the dear old earl did, and interest himself in their welfare, instead of doing good by proxy?"

"Well, well, he is about to do so, my sweet censor, he has promised Herbert to live, at least, six months of each year amongst us."

"Amazing stretch of condescension!" said Laura, pursing up her rosy lips.

Constance rose. "Farewell, dear child; remember I must see you all smiles when we meet again."

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And now in the silence and solitude of her own chamber, what were the feelings of the

"heiress of countless thousands," as she had been styled? Malgrove in poverty—comparative poverty—and privation, and she the possessor of boundless wealth. Till this hour she had never given a thought to his position in a worldly sense. It had not occurred to her that in the prodigality of a thoroughly unselfish nature he might involve himself in difficulties.

"Oh, Malgrove!" she exclaimed, in the agony of a wounded spirit, "how gladly, how thankfully, were it possible, would I transfer these useless thousands to your keeping."

Ever present to her mind, sleeping or waking, was the haunting memory of Laura Tarleton's words, "Poor and untitled, it may be that the heiress of countless thousands scorns an alliance with him."—"She does me bitter wrong when she speaks of scorn. Had an imperial diadem encircled this aching head, I should have believed myself honoured by an alliance with such exalted goodness, but we may not quite control the heart's affections. Why—why did that fatal prepossession come between us?"

She folded her arms upon the table, and laid her throbbing temples on them. There was an aching void, a sense of desolation at her heart; she yearned, though still half-unconscious that it were so, for some sound of human sympathy, some voice of love, of friendship—ay, even

of pity! So much for the happiness of the "high-born heiress of countless thousands!"

"Vivre en soi, ce n'est rien, il faut vivre en autrui." And so it came about that the pale and contemplative student, with his deep, true, tender heart, began to exercise strange influence over the thoughts and feelings of the lonely girl.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

What fire is in mine ears!—can this be true?

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

ANXIOUS to efface from Herbert's mind the impression which he must have conceived of her coldness, Constance, on the following morning, again bent her steps to the Rectory, still further induced thereto by finding the cards of Lady Malgrove and Miss Shirley on the table on her return from General Tarleton's.

The morning was fine, and the ladies were in the grounds. After waiting a few seconds, the voice of young Edward, who was playing on the lawn, arrested her attention; she knew that the adjoining room opened into the garden, she would seek them there; the door was not closed; she passed in, and there, his head leaning on his hand, sat Herbert himself.

Taken by surprise, Constance seemed about to withdraw, but in a moment Herbert rose.

It might almost be said to be the first time they had met since her rejection of him ; for the brief and solemn gathering at the altar could scarcely be deemed an interview, and many a sad and tender memory came thronging back with the review of that circumstance to chase the hot and eloquent blood which had rushed in a tide of crimson to the brow of Herbert at this sudden and unexpected sight of her who though ever absent was still always present to his mind.

Again young Edward's gleeful voice fixed the strangely embarrassed girl, and she turned to the open glass door, why, she never knew, but Malgrove took her hand.

"Nay, shrink not from me, Constance," said he, in a low, mournful tone, "for the universe, I would not again inflict a pang upon that gentle heart ; that I should ever have done so is to me a source of the keenest sorrow, but, trust me, other thoughts and feelings have succeeded to the wild ones I once dared to entertain, or I should not now venture to stand in your presence."

Why, at these words, did the blood ebb and flow round the heart of Constance ? "Other thoughts and feelings had succeeded to the

wild hopes he had once entertained!" Yes, these were his words.

Well! was not this the consummation she desired—this what, on bent knee, she had prayed for?

And why, when Miss Shirley entered a minute after, did she, with flushing cheek and tearful eye, gaze upon that fair and interesting girl as she turned to the invalid and tenderly inquired if he felt better?

Oh woman! woman! the best and wisest of your sex are—are—why, but woman!

"Herbert grows weaker and weaker each day," said Lady Malgrove, entering the room as he quitted it.

"Don't say so, it is the warm weather that so knocks him up," said Miss Shirley; "why he had the loveliest colour as I came in, and his eyes looked like stars; but there goes Edward after him as usual; he will drag him into no end of games if I don't go and play with him;" and away she flew.

"Dear girl!" said Lady Malgrove, "she would coin her heart for Herbert, as, indeed, she ought, for he is no less devoted to her. I shall be so lost when they are gone."

"Miss Shirley is leaving you then?"

"Leaving us! Oh! did you not know that? Why she will be married in a week, I hope. I

say hope more for Herbert's sake ; but for that he would not be now at Oatlands ; but they were both so anxious the ceremony should take place here, and, quite naturally, we have been cheated out of one wedding, you know. They leave immediately after the knot is tied."

"I was not aware that Mr. Malgrove—that—that—Miss Shirley, I mean—was on the eve of marriage."

"You *do* surprise me. Well, it has purposely been kept as quiet as possible, and then you are but just returned. Yes, she has been engaged some time ; Herbert and she had a perfect understanding upon the matter before they came to England, otherwise I really do not see how they could have been so nearly inseparable when they were abroad. She almost broke her heart when he left her so suddenly on Lord Castleton's account. Yes, the marriage is fixed for next week ; Herbert's indisposition has been the sole cause of its postponement."

Constance did not trust herself with a single comment ; she felt literally stunned ; presently she rose.

"Oh ! pray do not leave us so soon, Lady Constance. It would so gratify Herbert if you were to stay, if only to notice his darling Kate, and she—she will be delighted to talk about her happiness, and show you, girl-like, all her

wedding finery. Indeed, I must say the trousseau is perfect; of course, with *carte blanche* from Herbert, I took care that it should do credit to his taste."

But Constance rather coldly excused herself. She had heard enough of "darling Kate's" wedding, and had no desire to see her trousseau.

It was now her turn to muse upon the mutability of human passion, and of a verity, as she threw herself back in the carriage, she did marvel at it in this special instance, and she did smile at her own simplicity in having pictured the rejected Malgrove a broken-hearted man, and all for her sweet sake.

Her vanity had certainly received a sudden check; but the character of Herbert sunk in her esteem as she thought how light and fickle after all had that heart proved on whose fidelity she would fearlessly have staked existence. "Instead of sorrowing over her lost love, he had been revelling in the triumph of anticipated happiness with another—and she was forgotten."

But even as Constance gave these thoughts utterance, something smote upon her heart with a sense of their injustice. There was that in the countenance and demeanour of Herbert, even as she had just beheld him, which spoke not of happiness, far less of triumph, while memory could vividly recall the sad and sympathizing

gaze fixed upon her as she knelt at the altar's foot when he had pronounced the nuptial blessing on him whom she doubted not he knew she had once loved. That look betokened anything but forgetfulness, anything but indifference, oh! anything but triumph. The whole was involved in mystery; yet one thing was plain and clear enough, that he was on the eve of marriage with Miss Shirley, and that, with regard to herself, he had himself declared his feelings had undergone distinct change.

Agitated and, in spite of herself, saddened by all this, the while unconscious that awakening interest in Herbert had any share in it, she yet acutely-felt how much the certainty of his alienation sufficed to cloud the remnant of happiness left her. Tears filled her eyes.

"All, all are leaving me," she exclaimed, "even thou, Herbert, whom I had deemed no time or circumstance could change, hast abandoned me, and for a stranger of yesterday!"

The lady of Beechgrove forgot at that moment the slighted heart of him whom she thus denounced as false and fickle—forgot that over his existence she had flung the shadow of an eternal night—forgot that, absorbed in the struggle to uproot a misplaced affection for another, she had bestowed little regard or thought upon the crushed heart of him who had perilled all his



hopes in her love, only to see those hopes crumble into dust beneath his feet.

With unconscious egoism Constance could set up a defence of her own conduct, but the apostasy of her *ci-devant* lover was without excuse.

Solitude, however (and Beechgrove was its incarnation), together with calm reflection, induced a more generous verdict in the false one's favour.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

And truths divine came mended from his tongue.

POPE.

This was a cry of anguish from a bleeding heart.

MISS BRADDON.

ON the Sunday following her visit to the Rectory, Constance attended divine worship, as was her wont, at the church at Oatlands. It was thronged, that fine old church, now that their beloved pastor was to preach his last sermon, for at least some time to come. Herbert did not read prayers, nor, as the curtains of her pew were closely drawn, did Constance see him as he ascended the pulpit; but his voice—that deep, rich voice—fell upon her ear with all its well-remembered melody. Eloquent he had ever

been, but to-day she fancied he surpassed himself. It was a giant intellect, a master-spirit, that poured forth its abundance with untired vigour; grand, beautiful, and true, his discourse flowed on like the current of a majestic river.

Not a few rose and leaned over their pew, others sat with straining eyes fixed upon the preacher, fearful lest a word should escape them.

Suddenly Constance drew the curtains partially back;—whether the rustling it occasioned disturbed him, or accident directed Herbert's attention towards her pew, it so occurred that their eyes met; but if the lady, instantly repentant of her hasty movement, apprehended any painful effect on him, her fears, it should seem, were groundless. His eyes were instantly withdrawn. Calm and unmoved he stood: not the faintest colour tinged the marble cheek, not a line was disturbed on that high pale brow, nor did one tone of that superb voice falter till the very close of the address. Whatever weakness trembled at his heart, no outward sign was visible—he had evidently learned to control its wildest beats. Perhaps he deemed that holy fane no fitting place for their display.

Constance was the last to leave the church. As she stood on the threshold of the porch, awaiting the drawing up of the carriage, her eye involuntarily turned towards the Rectory.

Behind it, in proud and gloomy majesty, rose the diadem of trees that enclosed the stately mansion of the Castletons. On that spot on which she now stood, how often had she waited for Herbert and his friend, when, linking an arm of each within her own, they had walked home together !

And what prevented her doing so now ? why not, as in the happier days of yore, link her arm within his, and walk home with him and Emily ? Her foot was on the carriage-step, yet still she lingered—she would wait for Emily ; at that moment she passed, leaning on the arm of Kate Shirley. Their eyes met. There was a soft, almost beseeching, eloquence in those of Constance, but a cold, very cold, and distant bow was the only sign of recognition vouchsafed in return. The hesitation of Constance was at an end. Springing into the carriage, and drawing up the blinds, she threw herself back with a sobbing sigh.

“ Oh, Emily ! Emily ! I must indeed have greatly erred ere your gentle nature could be brought to show such proud resentment.”

Of Miss Shirley, she had noted little more than that she had looked well—radiant as a bride-elect.

The remainder of the day passed, as each day now passed with the lady of Beechgrove, in solitude, but it was a solitude peopled with

strange visitants : self-reproach was in the van—a new feeling to lodge within the breast of Constance.

How much that influences our future, whether for weal or woe, will sometimes lay trembling in the balance !

Distressed, subdued, her always warm heart awakened to generous sympathy, Constance had suddenly resolved to wait for Lady Malgrove ; she did so, but her pleading gaze was unheeded. Had that lady returned an answering glance, her hand had been pressed within that of Constance, and ere nightfall, perchance, two aching hearts had each understood the other's.

And Emily—could she have divined the effect of that glance, which had done such violence to her sweet and simple nature, how differently had she acted ! The truth was simply this : she had, soon after the return of Herbert, begun to suspect—more than suspect—that he loved Constance. She surmised it from his shrinking sensitiveness whenever she was the theme of conversation, and in the perfect silence he himself maintained on the subject. Once, too, when young Edward was showing some toy, the gift of Constance, and praising her with child-like earnestness of admiration, Herbert drew him towards him, kissed him fondly, twice, thrice, then abruptly left the room.

To a woman these were unanswerable evidences of love ; yet much Emily marvelled that he should leave the lady to the pain of uncertainty in the matter, for it never occurred to her imagination that he could be an unsuccessful wooer, she rather pitied her that she should be left to the pang of "hope deferred."

But Emily was soon to learn the truth. The day after Constance's visit she was engaged in running up a list of the guests invited on the occasion of Miss Shirley's nuptials, and Herbert, half reclining on a couch, was reading.

"Do lay aside your book, Herbert, while I read you this list. Thank you. I want you to tell me if I have asked everybody."

"Everybody! then you breakfast al fresco, for the Rectory is but a modest mansion to include so vast a company."

"And it is to be but a modest affair, Herbert."

"I hope so, my dear."

"Now, Herbert, don't be provoking ; why, if the whole county were invited it would scarcely meet your large-hearted hospitality. Do you know, sir, how many pounds sterling this dinner to the villagers will cost?"

Herbert smiled. "I know it would cost my sweet sister many tears if she had not this same village dinner to preside at ; it will be enough for you to enact Niobe in the morning ; tears

are en règle, I believe, at weddings, but you must be the genius of mirth at noon, remember."

How gaily Herbert spoke. Emily almost forgot the enumeration of her guests in the sweet happiness of seeing him so cheerful.

At last she began—her aristocratic list was a very short one. "The Mildmays," he nodded; "the Ashtons;" "go on;" "the Tarletons;" she paused.

"Oh, by all means; Laura will be sure to bring the laughing graces to your village festival."

The lady gently sighed, perhaps she had her own opinion on that head; and, for that matter, her secret too; but she was quite sure now that he had all along loved the fairer heiress of Beechgrove, so there was no help for it; only he must never, for his own sake as well as hers, guess how well Laura had loved him.

"Well, Emily? for the Tarletons do not end your list."

"Not quite," she coughed a little nervously. "The Vignolles, Herbert, if you see no objection."

"Is Sir Henry at home, then?" he archly asked.

She crossed over, knelt by his side, and pushing back the mass of hair from his forehead, kissed him.

"If—if you do not quite approve he shall not be asked, Herbert."

"My darling, yes, with all my heart! and let us have another nuptial-festival when you will."

"Herbert! why he has never even asked me," and she turned to her list: "the Ashtons?"

"Yes; you named them an age ago."

"I believe I did; it ends, then, with Lady Constance Greville," and in her turn she looked archly at him.

Herbert sprang to his feet—"Oh, no, no! not for kingdoms, Emily!"

Agitated beyond all power of control, he bent over her chair. The flush of excitement quickly subsided, and he stood before her self-betrayed.

"Dear Emily, Lady Constance could not—*would* not come."

His voice was so low and changed, that not for worlds would she have looked at him. She took his hand, it was icy cold.

"You will not ask her, Emily, promise me you will not!"

"No, oh no!" He was going. "Herbert! you will not leave me so. Will you tell me nothing?"

He turned at her appeal, so full of tenderness for him—he kissed her cheek—fondly, as he would her child's.

"My own sweet sister, I have little to tell; let me spare you even that little."

She did not speak, but she looked half reproachfully at him—tears were floating in those soft blue eyes.

"You have conquered, Emily; a tale of misery should be brief. Very early in life I met Constance Greville; in the hour I beheld I loved her, oh, so dearly! I thought such love must win love in return. I was mistaken; staking all I lost all. I was rejected. You have my secret, Emmy. I have nothing more to tell you, dear one—" and he was gone.

"Nothing more to tell!" she ejaculated, as she sunk upon her chair in a transport of grief and indignation.

"Cold, cruel Lady Constance! how did you dare insult such a heart as Herbert Malgrove's? Did you look for crowned heads to bow at your shrine? and, if they had, what then? What were these compared to the homage of such a heart as his? No, dear Herbert, 'tis she has lost all. Poor simple, silly one, with all her vaunted wisdom, her towering pride, that could not understand this. And thy tenderness and truth, my poor Laura, must be sacrificed to this marble statue, this petrification! I never really loved her; and now, now—heaven pardon me—but I think I almost hate her. That noble,



generous heart scorned—rejected! but that he who is truth itself affirms it, I could almost believe he has mistaken her pride—oh, she is so proud!—for indifference. A strange, strange mystery is the human heart,” she went on less vehemently, “ever sighing for the unattainable. Laura Tarleton’s is left with the arrow in it; and *his*, God knows what blood-drops have welled from his! ‘Alas, alas! how fated is the bark whose burden’s love!’”

And Emily Malgrove turned away with a sadder feeling than she had known for many a day—the thorn that rankled in her gentle breast was “that cold, hard, heartless Lady Constance!”

Ah, me! how erroneously do we judge when prejudice or passion holds the scales!

“Cold, hard, heartless Lady Constance!” Among the poor of Beechgrove she had, as we know, another and a softer title, and with right Catholic devotion was “Our Lady” worshipped.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

If solitude succeed to grief,  
Relief from pain is slight relief ;  
The vacant bosom's wilderness  
Might thank the pang that made it less.  
We loathe what none are left to share.

BYRON.

FROM the day on which Constance had called at the Rectory, a change seemed to have passed over her, and she confined herself for several days entirely to the house and grounds. A restlessness of mind took the place of her usual calm self-possession. Her occupations ceased to be amusements, the library she seldom entered, the music-room never.

Her flowers, once a very passion with her, had no longer their old charm. She would listen, indeed, with the same graciousness as ever to the suggestions of the aged gardener touching any improvement, for her kindly nature nothing could alter, but it was evident that all interest in the subject had fled. She moved about, conscious of her loneliness, conscious, too, that she had lost the power to invest that loneliness with the charm once thrown around it by her own ardent and inquiring spirit. Naturally of a contemplative cast of character, solitude had

exercised no depressing influence over her till this new and strange interest in Herbert came to change the current of her feelings, awakening a sadder and sweeter strain of melody within than she had hitherto dreamed of.

Towards Lord Castleton she had nothing wherewith to reproach herself, she knew that she had acted in a manner that became her, but did she stand equally acquitted in her dealings with Herbert? Ever present to her sickened fancy was his form as she had last beheld him, changed as though death had already set its seal there. And she it was who had wrought this notable deed; she had flung the shadow over his existence, turning all to a wintry waste. That loyal, loving heart had been cast at her feet, and she had turned away, so coldly, too, as it now seemed to her roused senses. Not even the graceful tenderness of friendship proffered in its stead. They had met; and no gleam of sympathy had responded to his unreproachful gaze, yet, there was that in his altered aspect that might have wrung, from a far less offender than herself, the tear of regret if not of remorse. It argued little in extenuation of her own conduct that he was about to wed with another. In the innermost deep of her own soul she knew that his heart was but an empty sepulchre, round which the wealth of another's affection

might, indeed, cling, but could derive no light or warmth from his. Even in that sad outburst of an overcharged heart which the unexpected sight of her called forth when they met at the Rectory, no kindly word of hers, no glance of soft compassion, had betokened a shred of interest in him—yet, well could memory recall the flood of anguish that had swept across that pale brow, the low sad voice, the faded form; and were these the symbols of indifference, of forgetfulness? these the heralds of triumphant success in the heart of another? No, a review of her conduct had brought a bitter sense of humiliation along with it. Before God and her conscience she stood convicted of cold selfishness, obstinate, unrelenting pride, and yet her praises she knew were in all men's mouths, "wise and good and beneficent" she was esteemed, she who had dared to trample down a noble heart, weak only in its abiding tenderness for her—every aspiration of his lofty yet generous nature she had crushed—and oh, miserable delusion! had hugged herself the while in the belief that she had acted nobly, wisely! With what subtle casuistry had she hitherto blinded herself to the truth. In this utter absorption of self, what an unconscious egoist had she proved herself. She could see it all now, could see, too, that it had, indeed, been no light measure of glory to have ministered

to the happiness of that man whose whole life was one long, long ministry to the weal of others.

And why had she not loved him? A suffocating sob replied to that question, preluded by another. Why had she loved his friend? Why, alas!

“Is human love the growth of human will.”

Not less highly gifted than Lord Castleton was Herbert Malgrove; in all the loftier virtues his equal—in the social ones, his superior; in personal endowments,—but here his altered form, contrasted with what it had been before her shadow darkened his path, smote her with renewed shame. Before! before! She could remember no time, even from her budding girlhood, in which those eloquent eyes had not revealed his heart's idolatry.

Well, it was all over now—was he not all but the husband of another? And yet, strangely enough, her mind seemed scarcely ever completely to realize the idea. At times she would altogether reject it as a kind of treason to Herbert. Then again, she would marvel at her folly. Had not Emily herself told her that Herbert had been engaged to Miss Shirley abroad, and that their marriage had been only incidentally delayed by his illness. “She would coin her heart for Herbert, and he is no less

devoted to her," had been her words. Where then was the doubt? and the whole village was in a ferment, she had casually heard. Her new maid had just asked permission to go with the rest of the women of the household to see the bride's trousseau. No doubt the day was fixed. Lady Malgrove had talked of a week hence. The week had pretty well expired. The servants would, of course, know, but Constance was somewhat reserved with servants, and she scarcely left the house now.

"What could it matter?" Yet she continued to muse and speculate, to wonder, too, "why young Edward never came. Was Emily Malgrove offended that she would not send her boy to see her? Why, all, all, even this child so fondly loved, had turned from her. Well, no matter, she would see Herbert again, once again before ;—before—" and the envied lady of Beechgrove burst into a passion of tears.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

The golden shell is broken,—the silver cord is mute,—  
The sweet bells all are jangled, and hush'd the lovely lute.

CONSTANCE had promised the gardener she would look at some heliotropes at the nurseryman's in the village. Languidly she set out to

redeem her promise, and languid and dispirited, after making her selection she was leaving the grounds, when turning short off from the main path, she saw Herbert and Miss Shirley, while at the entrance of a small conservatory stood Lady Malgrove. Miss Shirley was apparently preferring some request to Herbert, for her hand rested with loving freedom on his shoulder, and her eyes were raised to his with a petitioning solicitude in them.

How bright and happy she looked, that young fair girl! Constance could not see the expression of his face, but there was no doubt about the lover-like tone of his words.

"I can deny you nothing, sweetest Kate, be it as you will."

Constance advanced. She greeted each in turn with eager, almost ostentatious kindness. She so longed to atone; it was nevertheless to the bride-elect that she again turned, evidently with the design of marking her deep reverence for Herbert; but Emily had no clue to this, and only marvelled at the depth of feeling exhibited by this alp of ice, this cold, passionless being, to a comparative stranger, after snubbing her trousseau, too.

"Miss Shirley," she said, "will, I am sure, suffer me to offer her my warmest, heart-felt congratulations, tardily, indeed, expressed, but

not the less sincere. "My prayers and wishes you will believe go with you," and now Constance raised her large dark Georgian eyes, swimming in tears, to Herbert's. He returned the glance with one of glad surprise.

Lady Malgrove continued, or affected to continue, the examination of the heliotropes, but Constance would shake hands with her as she bade her and Kate farewell. Then linking her arm within Herbert's she walked down the broad gravel path.

"Miss Shirley is very lovely," said she breaking the rather awkward silence.

Another look of grateful pleasure rewarded her.

"She will be a happy woman, Herbert."

"I trust so, I trust in heaven so. I would not meet her at the altar if I had the shadow of a doubt in the matter; she is of a most gentle and attaching nature, and this is so purely a marriage of affection."

Constance fancied her heart beat audibly. "Purely a marriage of affection!" she echoed; "and *he* can say this *to me! to me!*"

They had reached the outer gate, the carriage drew up; still Constance lingered with her foot on the step. In another moment, however Herbert had assisted her in; with her hand yet in his she bent down her head, "Herbert, dear



friend," she whispered, "you cannot doubt that I rejoice in your happiness."

"*My happiness!*" he repeated with a bewildered air; "did Lady Constance say *my* happiness?"

But many curious though kindly eyes were on them. He dropped her hand. The door was closed, and the carriage drove off, yet he stood there gazing bewilderingly after it, doubly desolate for the vanishing of that sweet vision.

"Then he is not happy after all," sighed Constance. "What dreariness was in that smile as he syllabled the words '*my happiness!*' Why then make havoc of his peace? Better far to live an unloved, solitary life than fill it with remorseful memories. Yet why does he call it a 'marriage of affection,' and how more than delighted he looked at my praise of her; with what unutterable tenderness too he answered, 'I can deny you nothing, sweetest Kate.' Ah, me! how lightly these honied phrases glide from off men's tongues. How strangely cold and distant Emily is. Everybody seems turning from me. How very, very desolate I feel," and the lady of Beechgrove shivered, but not from the cold.

Again the carriage stopped, stopped before a smart little shop in the High Street, but heart-sick and weary Constance would not alight,

she had but little to say, and had forgotten that little. The smiling milliner appeared. "Your ladyship's mantle is not *quite* completed; if I *could* have had one more day; these grand doings at the Rectory make scarce hands," she went on apologetically; "another day would have been everything to me."

"As many as you please, Miss Kirby. When is Mr. Malgrove—when did you say the wedding was to take place?"

Miss Kirby was aghast at her ladyship's question, for of course she was one of the bridal party. "The day after to-morrow, your ladyship; pray heaven his reverence get well through the ceremony, but he is that tender-hearted, and does so dote upon Miss Kate."

"Good-morning, Miss Kirby—pray don't hurry with my mantle."

"A thousand thanks, your ladyship, and really it would be ra-a-ther warm for this weather. It will be charming if it lasts out like this for the wedding."

"'Blessed is the bride that the sun shines on,' you know, my lady."

The check string was impatiently pulled, and the garrulous little milliner's eloquence came to a sudden halt.

The wildest fancy now took possession of Constance. She would attend the church. She

would see Herbert yet once again before his departure, he should not see her, but she would witness the transfer of his faith, his violated faith she was ready to call it, to another. It was not so very long since he had on bent knee sworn allegiance to her. True, she had declined its acceptance, but was he *quite* justified in so hastily forming an allegiance with a comparative stranger?" The lady's sentence, unsupported by judge or jury, was against him.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

O weary hearts ! O slumbering eyes ! -  
O drooping souls whose destinies  
Are fraught with fear and pain,  
Ye shall be loved again !

ENDYMION.

AND the wilful lady of Beechgrove did witness the celebration of the nuptials in the village church of Oatlands. She went very early to avoid the crowd that would as a matter of course be assembled. No one knew of her being there, she did not mean they should, but she felt strangely deserted none the less.

After one long wistful gaze at the bridal party as, with the exception of the two principals,

they ranged themselves round the altar, Constance folded her veil thickly over her face, and then drew the curtains of her pew yet more closely and carefully together.

In another moment *he* would be there, and then would come the bride, and—she could not look upon them just then.

The church was filled to suffocation. Presently a confused though hushed murmur of voices announced the bride's arrival on the scene, and as soon as the rustle of silks and satins consequent upon the general rise of the congregation had subsided, the rich solemn tones of the minister's "Dearly Beloved" was heard in the remotest corners of the sacred edifice. But to whom did those tones belong? who was it that stood there to join the hands of Kate Shirley and—and——

Trembling, half-fainting, Constance clung to those closed curtains for support, they partially opened at her grasp and revealed to her startled gaze the person of Herbert Malgrove in the minister who stood before the altar. In that moment—in the sudden revulsion of feeling from sorrow to joy—Constance made the discovery that Herbert was beloved.

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It was not till noon the next day that word or sign of or from the Rectory reached Constance,

and then a couple of icy lines from Lady Malgrove requested, on behalf of Herbert, permission to take leave of her ladyship before his departure—that evening was named. No answer was needed ; with a quiet smile Constance kissed the freezing little note, and then serene in her new-born happiness sat down to await her visitor.

There was little of the lover apparent in the languid step with which Malgrove advanced to meet Constance, and though her greeting was warm and even affectionate it seemed all too powerless to call up a gleam of sunshine in those wan features ; yet he would fain have spared her even the reproach that these conveyed. That he made a desperate effort at self-possession she saw, and though not very well able to sustain it, she began a conversation on general subjects in the hope of relieving him. With almost any other man than Herbert her little ruse might have succeeded, but wholly unpractised in finesse he could not play a part.

The necessity to veil the feelings will sometimes teach it to a woman, but a man will rarely descend to it, least of all in a matter involving his nearest and dearest interests.

Availing himself, therefore, of the first pause, he said, " You will forgive me this intrusion ; even at the cost of paining you, Constance, I have risked it. I felt I could not leave England.

without a word, though that word were the saddest of all. I have come to bid you farewell."

She only bowed; Herbert thought coldly. As she had been prepared for this announcement of his leaving England, it occasioned no visible emotion, and her composure was set down to indifference.

"I should not perhaps have ventured hither," he went on, "but that I had nerved my heart to bear the pang of separation—to—to see you, in short, with calmness and courage."

Was it a smile that lit up the beautiful features of Constance, as she raised her eyes to his, as if to discover some token of this boasted "calmness," "this courage," beyond the blanched lips, and the tremulous tones that issued from them? And was it, could it be coquetry that prompted her next words?

"You have not, then, found indifference so hard a lesson to learn?"

"Indifference!" He echoed the word as if doubtful whether he had heard her aright.

"Did Lady Constance say 'indifference?'"

"*Lady* Constance did use the word, Herbert; but she will recall it since it pains you."

"Perhaps she did not quite regret its utterance; if a doubt of his true affection had lingered in her breast before, it was set at rest for ever."

His gaze of undying love, blended though it was with an expression of wounded feeling, left no question of his loyalty.

It might be that the very faintest tinge of pride was discernible as he withdrew that gaze, and a sigh but half suppressed escaped him. "I had not thought Lady Constance could inflict unnecessary pain."

Ah! how anxiously at another time had the generous girl sought to remove such an impression. Now, all within was tumult.

Herbert little dreamed that at the moment he writhed beneath her presumed contempt—at that very moment she would fain, in utter prostration of spirit, have knelt to him for pardon of the past. Now must she speak or never. Not one single regret, not one lingering memory of the past, shadowed that fair face, as she turned its full radiance upon Herbert, radiant from the entrancing thought that she was about to lift the dark cloud from his soul for ever.

It was a dangerous moment for so ardent a lover as Herbert—those sweet eyes beaming upon him, perchance for the last time, for he knew now that he had indeed miscalculated his courage when he deemed that he could stand in her presence, and still the wild pulsations of his heart to calmness.

Her resolve taken, there was no coquettish

tampering with the truth, no attempt at setting up a plea in defence of violated decorum. She knew that she was beloved; knew, too, that she had greatly erred. To atone was all that was left her, and atone she would.

Herbert rose. A brief "Farewell, dearest Lady Constance," sounded as a knell in her ear.

"Herbert, no! Why leave your home, your country—the friends who so love you?"

Now, to Malgrove's overwrought sense, there was bitter mockery in all this, and he replied a little coldly—

"It may be, Constance, that I lack the fortitude to stay; but you have spoken of home—home is where all gentle ties and feelings meet. I am bankrupt in these. Can happiness exist where these are not?"

"You go, then, in quest of it?"

"No, Constance, I have done with earthly happiness. I wooed her once, ineffectually; she fled affrighted from my grasp."

She approached to where he stood, she laid her hand on his, there was something of humility in the half-bent head, the while she raised her soft lustrous eyes to his with a beseeching, yet solemn expression. "Then let me help you to woo it back once more; let me nurse you back to hope, to happiness. Henceforth, Herbert, we will journey through life together."



There was dead silence after this. It was a moment of eternity to one. He trembled lest a word, a breath, should break the spell that enchained his senses. Her words he might have doubted if he had interpreted aright, but for the sweet earnestness of their tone, and that bowed head upon her bosom. Presently he drew her towards him. Those only who have for years nursed one bitter and corroding sorrow can in the remotest degree enter into the feelings of Herbert as he held the unresisting form of Constance in that clasp of love. Yet he was not deceived, or if he were, brief indeed was the delusion. With one long, long, quivering sigh he released himself from the sweet thralldom.

He saw, or believed he saw, that in the uncalculating generosity of her nature, Constance was prepared to make shipwreck of her own happiness to bring back peace to him, and at once his mind rejected the idea of profiting by her tender sympathy.

"Heaven bless you for the consolation these sweet words afford, Constance. Oh, how have I yearned for such ; yearned but for one glance that was not *all* indifference ! But it cannot be ! Dear and noble girl, your generous heart must not be thus sacrificed. If for one brief and blissful moment, those sweet words with heal-

ing on their wings, brought me back to life, to hope, that hope can no longer beguile me; priceless as is the gift of this dear hand, I would not accept it to be made Emperor of the World. Constance, Constance! think not so meanly of my love as to deem it would receive it at so precious a cost as your happiness—a more sacred thing in my count, oh, by very far! than the life-drops at my heart!”

“And this,” thought the lady, “is the heart I have dared, in the insolence of my pride, to reject; these the feelings I have ruthlessly trampled beneath my feet. God forgive me, but I have been very, very wicked!”

Gone from those beautiful features was the flush of joy that had so lately illumined them, while in its place was a wounded expression which sunk deep into the soul of Malgrove.

“I have deserved this, deserved that you should thus mistrust me, yet hear me, Herbert, before you in turn too hastily reject me. That it is no light and transient sentiment which can thus tempt me to cast aside the veil of reserve, and dare an unsolicited acknowledgment of affection, may well be believed. The bitterness of this sad hour, in which I see you bowed to the earth by sickness and suffering, in part, it may be, my work, with the added pang of separation, has wrung the avowal

from lips that else had been sealed. If heaven in mercy spare you, and it will—oh, Herbert, it will!—then this hand, once waywardly denied to you, is yours. I pledged myself it should be given to none other, when, in days gone by, you vainly sought a heart so unworthy of you; that heart, if you do not scorn it, is now indeed all your own, and, oh! dear Herbert, may its future fidelity atone for the past.”

It may be imagined that Constance did not proceed thus far without interruption.

And now Malgrove knelt before her, his arms round her, but no words escaped him, or if they did, they were less addressed to her than to the Father of all mercies; fervent, indeed, must they have been from such a heart as his.

The long pent-up suffering of an almost broken heart was laid bare before Constance that night, for far into the night they sat. Sometimes Herbert, mistrusting sight and sense, would pause to ask if it were not all a wild delusion, a brilliant cheat—then, her hand clasped to his bosom, would supplicate pardon for daring to make question of her truth. And how wildly she had been worshipped all through those days when *she* was absorbed in self, she now began to comprehend.

Ah, well! to the lofty and generous nature of Constance all this but bound her to him ten-

fold, and as, day by day, the almost god-like character of her now-affianced husband became more fully revealed to her, her affection rose to a devotion little less fervent than his own for her. Strange had it been otherwise, for none who had come within the influence of his singular fascination had been proof against it; she had proved the solitary exception; but, then, there had been a counter charm.

It is needless to say the parish of Oatlands retained its pastor. Within a month Emily became Lady Vignolles, and in another Constance removed to the Rectory; while the heir of the Malgroves, who had lately been passed from one to the other like a shuttlecock, began to talk to his uncle of high-heeled boots and the "Eton fellows."

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

A thing of shreds and patches.

SHAKSPEARE.

MORE than a twelvemonth has elapsed since the Earl of Castleton presented his countess to the loyal and warm-hearted tenantry of Oatlands. The day that ushered in the birth of an heir to the grand old race, was marked as a white-letter day in their calendar.

The Rectory has undergone little change. It was proposed by the earl to enlarge and beautify it. The first, Constance declared to be "unnecessary ; the last, a thing impossible—it was already so perfect !" And so it was. Sunshine, the heart's sunshine, within and without—how could it be less than perfect ?

The same sunshine shed its rays on the Castleton mansion, though Florence owned to just one little grief, a grief confided to none but Constance—her anxiety on Ellen Graham's account. That anxiety was full soon to cease, though under painful circumstances.

Herbert one morning read the following announcement in the "Times:" "On the 10th inst., in Lower Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, the Lady Graham, of disease of the heart." Now, in her child, whom he conjectured to be left very ill provided for, he knew that both Lord and Lady Castleton felt the most lively interest. He would run over, and let them know of this event ; there might be no grief, but they would be shocked as he was. Castleton had just sat down to the breakfast table.

" Florence not yet down ? "

His lordship gave a Burleigh shake of the head : " Herbert, to you I may confide a grave matter."

" And I another," thought Herbert.

"That nursery must be burnt down—my wife spends half her time there. I wish you joy of your prospective honours. Depend upon it nurseries should be abolished, put down by special Act of Parliament."

Herbert tried to smile. "And what would you do with the heir of all the Castletons?"

"There's baby-farming!"

"True.—Stratford, Lady Graham is ill."

"With all my heart : what is her complaint?"

"Affection of the heart."

"Ah ! it must be an ossification, then ; but I had long lost all belief in the existence of such an article in her ladyship's case."

"Any way it must prove fatal."

"The better for mankind I should say. The very breath of such a woman would suffice to breed a pestilence."

"My dear Castleton, Lady Graham is dead."

His lordship flushed, and dropped his tone of sarcasm.

"Then a too indulgent Providence has at last wearied of her crimes ; but did you think I needed your note of preparation?"

"Perhaps not ; yet you are shocked, I am sure."

His lordship frowned. "You forget my great and unavenged wrongs, Herbert !

"She has gone to answer for them ; but her

child is guiltless. She leaves an orphan girl, barely, I fear, provided with the necessary requirements of a gentlewoman—the estate, you may remember, is in strict entail.”

“I do ; but what is that to me ? Herbert, would you have me, directly or indirectly, living or dead, serve this woman, or aught of her race ?”

“I would have you do precisely what you please. I should hold it in the light of an impertinence to counsel, far less dictate in such a matter ; the rather, too,” he continued, with a smile, “that I am very sure you have already determined upon the course you propose to adopt, so I’ll go back to breakfast.”

“Stay, Herbert, stay !” exclaimed Florence, entering the room in agitated haste and taking his hat from him ; “you must not go. Dear Stratford, read this—oh, my poor Ellen !” and to the distress of both gentlemen she burst into tears.

The letter, deeply bordered with black, for Lady Graham was indeed no more, was from the orphan.

“Read it !—read it, Herbert !” she impatiently exclaimed, and Herbert ran through the letter with his lordship.

“And what are my darling’s wishes ?” in-

quired Castleton, drawing her tenderly towards him.

"Ah, Stratford ! enmity cannot live beyond the grave."

"With some men it might not ; with a good man I believe it could not ; I am not a good man, and my enmity to this woman, living or dead, will last my life-time."

"Stratford, no. Dear Herbert, speak to him."

"Quite superfluous ; he has long ceased to cherish any feeling but one of deep commiseration for this unhappy woman ; while in anticipation of your wish (for Constance has turned traitress), Ellen Graham's home is henceforth to be here ; nestled to your warm little bosom, Flory."

"Oh, you very dear, darling Stratford !" and Herbert's presence was no check upon the tender embrace that repaid her husband for this indulgence. Meanwhile his lordship looked infinitely amused, and half frightened his wife by protesting that this was nothing more than a bit of Herbert's romance.

"Ah, but a romance that we shall soon see converted into a reality ; so pray let me have a cup of chocolate, if it is not quite cold."

And Herbert's romance did turn out a reality. And the orphan daughter of her deadliest foe was even as a young pet sister to the blooming



countess. The only conspiracy ever formed against her lay in the introduction of our old favourite, Charles, now Captain Bathurst, which clearly had for its object an union between the two. The countess never openly acknowledged as much, but when his lordship, with a very significant shake of the head, accused her of being accessory to the fact, she adopted a rather cowardly line of defence, inquiring why he did not lecture Constance, who had been these six weeks past plotting to marry that sweet Laura Tarleton to wild Frank Vivian.

"And so I would, my love, but that she seems so recklessly abetted by Herbert himself; besides, I suspect your ladyship in that quarter no less than in this."

"Well, and could anything in the whole world be more bewilderingly charming than two weddings at once in our quiet Oatlands?"

And his lordship had really nothing to say against this "bewilderingly charming arrangement," so he wisely said nothing; but he shook his head as before, and Florence shook hers in return, but abated not one jot of her interest in the meditated alliance between her protégée and Charles Bathurst, while Lady Constance carried on hers in behalf of Laura and Vivian, *con spirito*; the result proving what the French would pronounce "*un grand succès*."

They had met (these two) in summer's sunny prime, and before the first autumn leaves were shed, the fair Laura was whisked away under the guardianship of the warm-hearted and generous Frank Vivian.

In Ellen's case Lord Castleton only stipulated for a year's probation, on account of her extreme youth; meanwhile her little fortune, husbanded by the earl, and finally doubled by him, formed a fair bridal dowry, and Captain Charles Bathurst, who, by-the-way, owed his commission to Lord Castleton, was far too much in love to take count of the lady's golden guineas.

We may here mention that one other person is added to the establishment at Oatlands. Often in the park-grounds may be seen a pale, sad woman, with bent form and snow-white hair. That pale, sad woman is Elsie Stewart. She is childless now as well as widowed. Hopelessly depraved, her son sunk to an early grave, and the mother owned his loss her best blessing; but the heart was not the less lacerated that it was constrained to admit this woful truth.

Florence sought her out in her desolation, forgave her, and by her sweet caresses won her to consent to pass the residue of her days at Oatlands. Nor is her heart quite dead yet. The blooming children of the blooming countess cling around her with fond affection, and she must

have some good in her, and some visible lovingness beside, to whom children instinctively cling.

Happiness, it is to be feared, can never be hers this side the grave, but resignation may. If any one can pour balm upon her wounded spirit, that one is surely Herbert Malgrove.

Our history draws to a close—and if the curtain falls upon soft tears, it falls upon bright smiles too—the last, less the exponent of the actors' feelings in this brief drama, than the first, for they are those of a happiness too deep and pure for aught *but* tears.

THE END.



1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

2. The second part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

3. The third part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

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